

Science Fantasy

A great new novel by
KEITH ROBERTS
commencing in this issue

THE FURIES



SCIENCE FANTASY

Edited by Kyril Bonfiglioli

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Contents

EDITORIAL	2
THE FURIES <i>by Keith Roberts</i>	4
A DISTORTING MIRROR <i>by R. W. Mackelworth</i>	101
THE DOOR <i>by Alistair Bevan</i>	120
THE CRIMINAL <i>by Johnny Byrne</i>	126

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Editorial Kyril Bonfiglioli

"Readable" was the word I was worried about in my last editorial and a surprising number of readers seem to have joined me in my pre-occupation with this word and its use. It has struck me that during my undergraduate career (a good word, that, with its suggestion of increasing momentum along a downhill slope) I must have written well over a hundred essays about English Literature and Language without ever having cause to mention readability—yet it unquestionably exists and can be isolated and it is the dominant factor when it comes to selling literature to a publisher. As I tried to show last time, it is often quite unconnected with literary merit yet can exist—perhaps *should* exist—alongside it.

"Sapper", Conan Doyle, Edgar Wallace, Agatha Christie, Rider Haggard, Mickie Spillane (to make a rather random selection) all exhibit readability of various kinds to a very high degree, without, in most cases, claiming any particular literary excellence, although time has lent a kind of vintage dignity to some of them.

Defoe, Swift, Jane Austen, Dickens, Kipling, Maugham, have both quality and readability, some by God's gift and some by dint of careful craftsmanship. Others—Thackeray, George Eliot, Meredith, Besant—once had both but have lost the latter in the course of time. A very few of the top flight—E. M. Forster's name springs to mind—tower unmistakably although neither gifted with, nor striving for readability.

What is in all this for us—the SF devotees? One conclusion is inevitable: our sort of fiction has its roots firmly in the pulp magazines and since these survive by the casual, non-enthusiast readers and not by the relatively few 'fans', readability must be a major consideration. A few years ago it was practically the sole one, until the public became sated by the more repetitious hacks, and the trashier pulps folded up one by one. Even today, when the battle for SF's respectability is in some measure won, a magazine takes its life in its hands each time it prints a 'difficult' story.

The other conclusion is that, for the habitual reader of science-fiction, a special set of readability factors exist, to which any new writer must tug his forelock. Like the detective-novel 'fans' of the last generation, we demand that a story must obey certain rules: we feel cheated if the murderer turns out to be the police inspector. Space-drive must have some kind of *rationale*, robots must obey the laws given us by Dr. Azimov, the story generally must be true to itself—must grow out of its own postulates and not be merely a disguised Western. But on top of this we demand—wrongly, I think—that the plot must be new or at least be written around a new notion. This is absurd. A good plot is susceptible to an infinite number of rescensions: Bérout, Thomas, Walther von der Vogelweide, Marie de France, Malory, Tennyson, Arnold, Wagner and dozens of others used the Tristram plot—and so did a lady novelist a couple of years ago. Moreover, insofar as SF does depend on technological and scientific 'predictions', our generation's crop of imagination has, I suspect, just about run dry and fiction will have to pause while science catches up. If and when we really have a time-machine there may be new parameters in which to imagine; the ones we have are full. The great imaginers of the 1940's pretty well filled them: new writers are either filling up the chinks or, like Aldiss, Miller and Ballard, turning their curiosity inwards, away from space, away from what man may next achieve. The two finest novels we have had lately—*A Canticle For Leibowitz* and *Greybeard*—are in a way the very reverse of science-fiction: they celebrate defeated mankind.

I hate to say it but, when I look at the future through the bottom of my ale-glass I can see about as much hope for science-fiction *as we have known it* as there is for the detective-novel, unless this insistence on novelty relaxes. It cannot hope to be accepted as part of the mainstream while it is bound by conventions more rigid than the ones it claims to be destroying.

KYRIL BONFIGLIOLI

We were very pleased to be the first to spot Keith Roberts as a winner and to print his first story. Now that he has the bit between his teeth as a writer of growing reputation we are more than pleased to be able to print his first novel —

THE FURIES

by Keith Roberts

the first of three parts.

PROLOGUE

We may call them the Keepers. The thing they guarded so jealously was not material in the way that we humans understand the word. It had volume but no shape, mass but no size. A seething knot of memories, an electric tree of wisdom, it came burgeoning through space, tossed by gravitic currents, licked at by the flames of suns in nova. It came to Earth . . .

Maybe the Keepers were tired. To them, Vanderdecken was an ephemeral creature and the millennia of Ahasueras no more than the slow blinking of an eye. Their voyage stretched forever, into the future and into the past, back, back, back beyond our Time, back to the births of the galaxies. Where they had come from, even the Keepers had forgotten. How they had been spawned they had never known.

They could not bleed, they could feel no pain or fear. They owned no cells that could die, no bone that Time could vaporise. They were raw, and nude beyond our comprehension of bareness. Maybe at last they had become hungry. Hungry for the thick comfort of flesh . . .

It could be they found us by blind chance ; or perhaps they sensed us and were drawn. Maybe the fears of terror-stricken worlds spread like ripples into unguessable continua, bringing their own retribution. We shall never know.

What we do know is that the space-things discovered Earth. They saw the warmth of her sun. They tasted the green of her continents, the blue-silver skeins of her seas. They sensed her Life with every ramshackle nerve, and to them all that they found seemed good. They piloted their burden through meteor-haunted shells of air. They dropped down to where they could see cities boiling like the homes of insects. Then lower, and closer, and lower. . . . They hung in the sky, invisible, a focus of storms and anxieties. They watched and schemed and planned and observed. And, in time, their choice was made.

They turned on the thing they had protected for so long, ripping it apart, gobbling its essence into themselves. They swelled with new knowledge and confidence. They readied themselves for their first and only transformation ; and somehow, somewhere, the incredible happened. The Word—their Word—became flesh . . .

* * *

CHAPTER ONE

I've shown that opening to three or four people and so far nobody has liked it. They say it's too fancy and in any case it can't be proved. I know it can't be proved, and as for being fancy—well, this is my book and I reckon I can start it any way I want. After all I was asked to write it ; I pointed out at the time I was a cartoonist not an author, but nobody would listen.

I'm Bill Sampson, and as I said I used to draw funny faces for a living. The year all this started, the year of the Neptune Test, I was living in a village in Wiltshire called Brockledean. I suppose I'd done pretty well for myself ; I'd got my own house, an XK150 and a Great Dane ; I was fairly comfortably off and I wasn't quite thirty. I'd had a stroke of luck of course ; I'd done a lot of jobs in my time, from driving lorries to hauling boxes about in a department store, nothing had lasted very long and I'd never made more than a bare living, sometimes not even

that. Then I ran into an old contact of mine and managed to weasel my way into a freelance arrangement with one of the big publishing houses just as they were launching a new kid's comic. I was working as a general hack in a seedy little agency at the time; I chucked that when I got a bit more established, and not long afterwards I was worth enough to be looking round for some nice fat chargeable expenses to fool the tax people. A pal of mine suggested I put some money into property. It seemed a good idea; in those days even a lousy businessman could scarcely lose with bricks and mortar. I started looking round.

The choice wasn't easy. I'd sworn I'd never live in a new house; there was something about modern jerry-building that I found infinitely depressing. A Development affected me like a blowsy London pub, it reminded me of the shortness of life. I saw a lot of property; most of it was in the active process of falling down, and the prices conformed to my definition of daylight robbery. Then I heard about the place at Brockledean and drove out to have a look. It seemed ideal. The house had been a pub at one time, and it stood on its own about a mile away from the main village. Not much in sight except a handful of farm outbuildings. The countryside round about wasn't exactly beautiful but it was undeniably pleasant. There was a room with a North light that would be fine for a studio, and there was a garage. The garden was small and mostly under grass so keeping it in order wasn't going to be a full-time job. All in all the setup just about fitted my needs; I got a mortgage without too much trouble and settled down to enjoy a life of rural simplicity.

I developed a routine. Once a week I'd go to London to deliver artwork and collect scripts, the rest of the time, including Saturdays, I'd work like a bank clerk. There's nothing romantic about art of course, it's just like any other job. You work fixed hours and try to put it out of your mind when you're off duty; sit round waiting for inspiration and you'd soon run out of crusts. My days were pretty full at first because I was catering for myself; cooking the evening meal usually turned out to be something in the nature of a crisis. I got better in time, of course,

though I'll admit I'd never make a chef. After the smoke had cleared and I'd washed the dishes I'd usually prowled round the house for a while just trying to picture what it had been like in the good old days when it was a pub. That wasn't difficult; it was the sort of place that invited imaginings. The main structure wasn't old as country houses go but the foundations and cellars were a different thing altogether. The floors were massive, supported by heavy beams, and downstairs there were some round brick arches that looked to me like sixteenth century work at least. There'd been a tavern here in the times when loving-cups were passed. Perhaps the place was haunted; there were all sorts of pleasant possibilities.

As you've probably worked out, I'm a bit of a melancholic by nature. I love old things; old buildings, old ideas. The house still kept a lot of relics of its pub days; there was a mark on the brickwork of the front wall where a notice of some sort had been fixed, and there was a post that had evidently supported a sign. It was bare now and stuck up beside the gate like a little gibbet. The estate agent was going to have it removed but I wouldn't hear of it.

I settled down quickly enough, but after a few months I got to feeling that something was missing somewhere. I'd lie awake nights and listen to the timbers settling and creaking, and the hundred unidentifiable noises that old houses make, and I'd feel pretty lonely. I'd promised myself I'd never have a woman in the place; I hadn't been able to find anybody to share the hard times—not that I blamed them—and now I was better off I was too crabby to want to split my profits with a wife even supposing I could find one. If I needed company, though, there was an obvious alternative: I bought myself the Great Dane.

She was a bitch; I'd wanted a dog but when I saw her sprawling round the run at the kennels I knew I was just going to have to buy her. She was black, like polished jet, and from the time she was a knobbly-kneed puppy there was only one name for her. Sekhmet, Egyptian goddess of darkness, consort of the lord of the underworld. Maybe it was a little high-flown; anyway it soon got shortened to Sek, which was classically unsound but a whole lot easier to yell.

One of Sek's minor advantages was that she seemed inordinately fond of my cooking. I could never resist the temptation to dabble about with fancy recipes; as often as not the results were disastrous but it seemed to me the more horrible the mess the more she enjoyed it. Maybe she was just being tactful; it was hard to tell with her, she was naturally polite.

When the daily battle was over I usually walked Sek for a couple of miles. We'd always finish up at the "Basket-makers Arms" in Brockledean. She was a firm favourite there. They kept biscuits behind the bar for her; she'd stretch her neck, push her great dark head over the counter, roll her lips back from her teeth and take the goodies as if they were made of glass. Then she'd eat them without leaving a crumb. She developed a fair taste for beer as well, though I usually restricted her to a dishful at the most. I felt one dipso in the family was enough.

They were a nice crowd in the "Arms": farm workers, market gardeners, an old 'diddy' who ran a one-man scrap business; the type of folk I like. I had one particular friend there. His name was Tod; he was a great character, and as Irish as they come. He was a County Mayo man, an agricultural graduate and a 'grower'. His people had been growers for generations, and although he was a company director he'd never got round to thinking of himself as someone different. He used to travel the country advising on problems to do with agriculture; his firm specialized in crop spraying and he was an expert on pest control. I did one or two little jobs for him from time to time; copywriting, layouts and visuals for advertising, that sort of thing. I'd never take any money for them but Tod paid in kind; they had a sort of model farm just down the road and he was my source of supply for fresh eggs, farm butter and cheese and the Lord knew what else besides.

It was from Tod that I first heard about the Furies. I walked into the "Arms" one night in late June when Sek was eighteen months old and just coming into her prime. Trade was slack but Tod was sitting in his usual place at the far end of the bar, nose in the *Guardian*. He handed the paper across to me, marking an item with his thumb. By sheer luck I've managed to get hold of a copy of that

article; it was headed 'Strange Attack in Dorset', and it ran as follows.

From a special correspondent:

News was received today of an odd incident involving a man from Powerstock near Bridport, in Dorset. James Langham, aged 23, a farmhand, was driving a tractor on the property of his employer, Mr. Noel Paddington, when he was attacked by what he described as a monstrous wasp. The creature, said by Langham to have been a yard or more across the wings, appeared suddenly over a hedge and dived at the machine at great speed. Langham was able to duck out of the way of the assault, the insect passing over his head and hitting the wheel of the tractor. The assailant then fell to the ground, enabling Langham to kill it with a lucky blow from a spade. The remains were carried in a sack to a nearby barn and Mr. Paddington informed. On investigating two hours later he could find no trace of the creature though Langham was most insistent as to the truth of his story. He was much shaken by his experience, and remained at home today. He described the attacker as 'droning like a low-flying plane' and claimed the sting alone, unsheathed in the death throes, was over a foot in length.

Local police are at present investigating the deaths of three dogs in the vicinity. In each case the bodies were found considerably swollen and each animal appeared to have been killed by a thrust from some sharp-pointed weapon such as a stiletto or bayonet. Asked if the wounds could conceivably have been caused by some such over-size insect, a constable remarked that 'if it was a wasp, he would not care to meet it.' Samples of tissue from dead animals have been submitted for analysis with a view to determining what if any poison is present, though no report has yet been received.

There was a footnote.

The Curator of the Insect House at the London Zoo said today 'The largest living insect known to science is a beetle, Macrodonia Cervicornis, which attains a length of almost six inches. The construction and operation of an insect's body are such as to render any form larger than

this highly improbable. A size of three feet or more would be out of the question.'

I put the paper down and shook my head. "I've heard some tales in my time but this takes some beating. Do you believe it, Tod?"

He took a pull at his Guinness. "No. It isn't possible. And it's just as well, sonny Jim, I'll tell ye."

I chaffed him. "How come? I should have thought you'd welcome it. Look at the trade you'd do squibbing away at whopping great things like that."

He looked at me queerly. "You'd be laughing over the other half of your face if it was true, Bill. You think about it. Imagine a wasp. The power of it, the body of the thing packed with muscle and venom. You haven't got an animal there, you've got a machine. All sheathed in with chitin, and that'd be tougher than steelplate. You'd need an armour-piercing bullet to hurt him and all the time he'd be coming on and coming on, and you'd never step from the way of him. And his sting, it would go right through you and come out on the other side, like the paper says it'd be a bayonet. And there'd be his jaws too, snipping away like bolt cutters. Make no mistake, if a wasp was blown up to a yard big those mouth parts would have your arm and no bother to it."

I said "Charming, I'm sure . . ."

He said "There'd be other things of course. Things like social organisation. He's just as smart as we are at getting things done."

I frowned. "You're a mine of nasty ideas tonight, Tod."

He grinned at me. "There's things that get in a man's mind and won't be driven away, it's the mystic Oirish in me, I tell ye. . . . I say the next great time will be the Age of the Insects. If these big wasps were real we'd have it on us in a jiffy."

I said "That's wrong for a start, insects missed their chance. They've been around for God knows how many years. If they'd been going to dominate they'd have done it before now."

He shook his head. "Oh no . . . There were little dinosaurs scuttling and hopping for a good while before Tyrannosaurus sat up and barked. And take mammals,

they spent long enough running about like cane rats before one of them built the Pyramids."

Never argue with an Irishman. He revels in it.

"Take a fly in amber," said Tod, warming to his theme. "See the little beast, the hairs of him, and his wings, and the twinkle in his eye. He's a good few times older than the human race but he's just the same as the ones outside on the muckheap. Now insects have waited a long time, and some of 'em with a social structure approaching ours an' all, and they haven't changed or evolved, they haven't gone up or down. That means as living machines they're pretty near perfect, which we most certainly are not. We're shedding our poor teeth and claws and we need a whole mess of things to keep us alive and warm, we're fast losing what adaptability we have left and that was bad for the dinosaurs."

I said "But insects aren't adaptable either."

He opened his bright blue eyes wide. "Ah now there ye go, dabblin' in what doesn't concern ye once again. Now if ye would just stick to the art of drawing and allow us professionals to know what is going on and what is not . . . Of course your insect is adaptable. If he wasn't, I'd be lookin' for a job. He can live on cyanide of potassium if he wants, we can't. Look, there's people in laboratories with real heads on their shoulders and they're worryin' to death because of running out of things to invent, and the little beggars of insects growing fat on last year's sprays. I tell ye."

I said "Like the penicillin immunity."

"The very same . . ." Something droned in the darkening sky, and he stopped. He said "What do ye suppose the man saw then? Now what could come snapping and buzzing at ye like that, on a nice bright summer day?"

I didn't answer. The noise got louder; then we both saw a plane fly across the window and disappear. Tod laughed. "I tell ye, I'm nervous already. You give a device like a wasp just this one little advantage of size and he'd be down on us from the air. Like the creatures in the story that tormented the poor souls for their sins, now what were they called?"

I said "The Furies."

He nodded slowly, sipping the drink and rolling it round his mouth. He said "Yes, the Furies. Come to think of it now, that would be a good name for a pack of things like that . . ."

For the next few days I kept a curious eye on the newspapers but there were no more reports, tongue in cheek or otherwise. Of course through most of that year nearly all news was overshadowed by the nuclear test series being run by both East and West. The American experiments were to culminate with the Neptune Project, the forthcoming detonation on the bed of the Pacific of a five-hundred megaton bomb. It would be the biggest-ever man-made blast, and for nearly six months the press had been retailing arguments for and against it. The Navy claimed with some asperity that the effects on tides and currents would be global and catastrophic while the Fisheries people were worried about contamination; some authorities claimed it would be years before safe catches could be made anywhere near the affected areas. As I remember there were even some doubts expressed about the ability of the earth's crust to withstand the shock, though they were immediately howled down as alarmist and unscientific. For most of us, of course, there was nothing to do; we just sat around like saps and waited for the big bang.

From shortly after the signing of the first test-ban treaty it had been obvious that, despite the drum-banging of politicians, the agreement did not mark a new era in human development. For me the proverbial cloud no bigger than a man's hand appeared when an American statesman declared that the signing represented a challenge to the forces of peace. 'We must keep alert,' he said, 'so as to be ready to resume testing instantly if and when the enemy broke his word. Whether Russia actually did explode a thermonuclear device in the atmosphere is now of course of merely academic interest.' American experts claimed to have detected a sharp increase in the world level of radiation; Notes were exchanged between East and West, the United States protesting that the treaty had been violated, Russia retaliating by claiming the whole thing to be a Capitalist plot designed to shift the blame for what were, in fact, Western experiments. Shortly after that seismo-

graphs recorded heavy shocks which could have been and probably were underground trials in the vicinity of the old testing ground in Novaya Zemlya. America, thoroughly alarmed, warned the Kremlin that she would not hesitate to continue her own experiments in the interests of world peace. Great Britain supported her by announcing an intention to 'stand firm', though how, and with what, was never made clear. Russia stayed quiet. Shortly afterwards, the West announced the full-scale resumption of atmospheric testing. The event was efficiently publicised and the Russians rapidly followed suit by beginning a new series of their own.

It was rather like drug addiction; after a temporary abstinence both sides returned to the habit with redoubled vigour. At the beginning of the year radiation levels stood fifty per cent higher than they had done in the scare of the late fifties, and the best was still to come. In Great Britain we saw a boycott of Welsh farm produce, and the Ministry of Health attempted to calm the populace by making a hasty upward revision of all safety levels. The Press began to remark on odd side-effects; one of the most significant was that, as during the London Blitz, the churches began to fill . . .

A couple of nights after talking to Tod I had a visitor. It was about seven o'clock and dinner was well under way. I forget what I was trying to cook but I'm sure it would have been better not to bother. The kitchen door was propped pessimistically open and Sek was outside somewhere. I heard her bark briefly, then again, then she was quiet. I stopped operations and called her. When she didn't come I walked round the side of the house to find out what was the matter: a Dane never speaks without a reason. When I came in sight of the front lawn I stopped. I was a little taken aback.

The girl had already come through the gate and she was on her knees in the drive, Sek's head towering above her. She was rubbing the great animal on the chest and Sek was standing there soaking it up and looking as sloppy as possible. The youngster straightened when she saw me; she was tall, she might have been fifteen or sixteen. It was hard to tell. She was neatly dressed in blue jeans and a

check shirt ; her face was round and rather serious with a straight, stubborn little nose and wide-spaced, candid blue eyes. She had a superb mane of dark hair, sleek and well-brushed, caught up behind her ears with a crisp white ribbon. Altogether, a surprising vision. I said "Well, hello. Who are you?"

She said "Jane Felicity Beddoes-Smythe. How do you do?" She held out her hand.

I said "Bill Sampson and I'm pleased to meet you. But that wasn't very wise, you know."

She was bending down again, calling the dog. "What?"

"Walking in like that. Sek might not have taken to you."

She said "Pooh, what rot. *What* did you call her?"

"Sek. It's short for Sekhmet. Go on girl, it's all right." That to Sek ; now that I'd arrived she had become more officious and she was avoiding the outstretched hand. She went forward instantly and allowed herself to be petted. I said "What can I do for you, Miss Smythe?"

She looked at me blandly. She said "Beddoes-Smythe. I don't care, but Mummy likes to hear both barrels go off. It isn't important though, I respond very well to Jane."

I shook my head slightly. Her voice was beautifully modulated ; it struck me she came from the sort of family who's so wealthy they can afford to be polite. I said "All right then, what can I do for Jane?"

She waved a well-thumbed exercise book. "I'm on vacation, we came down last week. I've got a holiday task that rather leaves me gasping so I thought I'd bring it down and get the scientist to help me with it."

I was baffled. "I'm afraid you've got it wrong. There's only me here and I'm not a scientist."

She giggled suddenly, tossed the book down and started to wrestle with Sek, who was only too willing to play. She said "That's an alibi, I thought it was quite ingenious. I told our housekeeper you were a scientist and a friend of Daddy's. Actually I just wanted to come and see the dog."

I started to grin. I said "Where do you live, Jane?"

She pointed briefly. "Over there. Brockledean House. Mummy and Daddy are away at the moment, they're not expected back for some time. What's that smell?"

I said "God, the dinner . . ." I pelted back to the kitchen. Smoke met me. I groped my way inside and got the pan off the stove. On the way out I nearly collided with Jane. She started to cough. She said "What a terrible mess. Do you always get in a state like this when you try to cook"?

I finished scraping the remains onto the garden. I said "It isn't usually quite as bad as this. But sometimes people call at the crucial moment. Then I forget, and things go haywire."

She said "Gosh, I'm terribly sorry. Can I help?"

"No, it's all right. I can cope."

She said "Please, I should feel much better. After all, it is my fault. Don't worry, I'm quite good in a kitchen."

I said "I wouldn't hear of it."

She was easily the most determined girl I'd ever met. Half an hour later we both sat down to a first-rate mixed grill, far better than anything I could have cooked. I complimented Jane and she lowered her eyes in false modesty. "There's a trick to it" she explained. "It's very simple really. You get all the things you know are going to take longest and put them in first. Then the others, sort of by stages. That way they all come ready at the same time."

She insisted on helping with the washing-up. As we were stacking plates she said "What do you do for a living, Bill?"

"I draw silly pictures."

She said "You need some more soapflakes by the way . . . do you mean you're a cartoonist?"

"Yes . . . Look Jane, this is very sweet of you but won't your people worry?"

She shook her head decisively. "There's only the Carters. They live in, he does the gardens and she's a sort of general help. They're not really with it, I doubt if they'll miss me till after dark. I'm often out on my own."

I said "All the same, it's getting late. Can I run you back?"

She laughed. "That *would* cause it. Accepting lifts from strange men . . . No thanks, Bill. In any case I go back across the fields, it's quicker that way. You must come and look over the house sometime, it's really rather fine. Can I come and see you again?"

I said "But of course, love to have you."

She said "Good. I'll come earlier tomorrow, then we can take Sek for a run. Will that be all right?"

"Yes, if you want."

She said "I'd like a dog. It's difficult though, because of term time. Mrs. Carter would have to look after it and she isn't very fond of animals." She held out her hand again, formally. She said "Goodnight Bill, thanks for putting up with me. Goodbye Sek." She ran to the gate, swung over it and trotted off down the lane. The last I saw of her in the dusk was the glimmer of her ribbon and the twinkle of white ankle socks. I wandered back into the house, lighting my pipe on the way. The kitchen seemed very quiet. I said to Sek "Well old girl, we certainly see life. Or don't you think so?" She bunted my arm with her huge head and walked into the hall. I heard the tinkle of her lead as she tried to pull it off the hook. I said "All right clot, no need for the broad hints. You know I don't lead you at this time of night." She came back instantly, walked through to the garden and stood looking alert. I said "Go on then." She cleared the gate with a bound—a favourite trick of hers—and headed up the lane. A few yards on she waited for me and we walked to the pub together.

I half expected I wouldn't see Jane again but she turned up as arranged. We walked a good way ; she chattered a lot about her parents and her friends, her school, her life at Brockledean. Most of what she talked about was new to me ; I'd never known much in the way of luxury, anything I wanted I'd had to earn. Jane's father was a stockbroker, and her mother was quite rich in her own right. The girl had her own pony and there was a swimming pool in the grounds of the house. She usually spent the summer with family friends in Sussex but this year that had been impossible. She was an only child and I suppose with her people away she was glad of my company.

The walks became something of an institution. I remember thinking it would be a pity when Jane's parents came back, my place was going to seem pretty empty without her. There was no reason why she shouldn't keep coming over,

of course, but I had a pretty good idea that wouldn't be allowed to happen. She wanted to come to the pub with me one evening but I put my foot down there, it would just be asking for trouble. She invited me to tea at Brockledean instead. It was a date that neither of us kept; the Furies intervened.

I first heard about the Berryton massacre from Jane. I was shaving one morning when the phone rang; I went through to the hall yawning, and picked it up. I said "Hello?" wondering who the devil it could be.

"Hello Bill" said the handset huskily. "Bet I got you out of bed . . ."

I still wasn't orientated. "Er . . . who's speaking?"

"Me, you clot. Jane . . ."

I said "Good Lord, I didn't think . . . what's the matter, love?"

A pause. Then, "I don't quite know. But I sort of had to ring, I couldn't think of anyone else . . . something awful's happened, Bill. It was on the radio a little while ago . . ."

My heart did a few circuits and bumps round my rib-cage. I'd been waiting for World War Three for a long time but I'd never quite got used to the tension. I said "What is it, some fool started a shooting match?"

She said "No, not quite as bad as that. But a lot of people got killed in Somerset. A whole village, the man said. I've never heard anything like it. They said it was great big wasps . . ."

I thought of Tod, and the news item in the paper. But it was crazy. I said "Look Jane, is this a gag?" I knew before she answered it was nothing of the sort.

I looked at my watch. About five to eight. I said "Tell you what, there's a newscast coming up in a few minutes. I'll listen in and then ring you back, or you can call me. OK?"

"I'll call you." Her voice sounded very mature on the line. "I might have to leave it till mid-morning though. Will you be in?"

"Yes, all the time . . . Jane, are you all right over there?"

"Yes, of course . . . I'm just worried because it's all so queer. I'll call you; 'bye . . ." The line went dead.

I put the handset back on the cradle, frowned at it for a moment then shrugged. I went into the kitchen and turned on the radio. I was still finishing my shave when the news started. By the time the announcer had got out half a dozen sentences I'd forgotten the lather on my face. I was leaning over the set to catch every word.

CHAPTER TWO

Berryton lay on the border of Dorset and Somerset, a straggling village of some two thousand inhabitants. How many insects took part in the raid was never fully established but between them they managed to account for nearly a quarter of the population. The first warning of their approach was a deep throbbing that reminded some hearers of a formation of planes. They circled the place at a considerable height, only just visible from the ground. People came out of their houses to stare and point; there was uneasiness but no real alarm. Then the creatures dived, and within minutes the place was a shambles. Some of the attackers went for the pubs, others made for the village hall where some sort of meeting was in progress. Some smashed their way into the church, where numbers of refugees had gathered; others simply flew up and down the street hawking at everything in sight.

Only one insect was known to have been killed. It was crawling in the road when a truck driven by the local garage owner hit it, crushing its head. Numbers of wasps gathered at once and according to eyewitnesses the unfortunate man was dragged out and dismembered on the spot. The incident seemed to have signalled the end of the attack. The creatures flew off into the evening sky, taking their casualty with them. They left the village battered and stunned.

Help had been quick to arrive. Ambulances and medical teams had been rushed to the spot from as far away as Exeter while the police and military had thrown a cordon round the entire area. Units of the Royal Armoured Corps supported by Fleet Air Arm helicopters were combing the

country round about in an attempt to find the nests; schools had been closed, and all public transport suspended. The newscast finished with a warning to people living in and near the trouble spot to stay in their homes as much as they could and to help the military by reporting any sightings without delay. Above all, they were urged to stay calm. The fullest possible measures were being taken; the menace was local, and could and would be met. Further bulletins would be issued as fresh information became available.

What we didn't know then was that the creatures had managed to establish themselves in nearly every country in the world. In France, a village in Normandy had been almost wiped out and the same thing had happened in Belgium and Holland. In America the first sightings were reported from places as far apart as New England and New Mexico. The Eastern *bloc* had their problems too; Czechoslovakia and Poland had been invaded and Russian planes had bombed nesting areas, probably causing more casualties to humans than insects. We were slower to resort to extreme measures and England was probably one of the first countries to be completely overrun. The things spread out from Wessex, that old melting-pot of alien cultures, to attack every town in the land.

Jane phoned again as she'd promised and we talked the whole thing over. We were a long way from the trouble but she thought it would be best to stay in for the time being. She said that in any case she was expecting her mother to call. After she'd hung up I went into the studio and tried to get some work done but I couldn't settle. I was glad when it got round to evening and I could go along to the "Arms."

They'd set up a tube in the public bar and a bigger crowd than usual had gathered to watch. The BBC news teams had had a field day; we saw an hour-long tele-recording that covered every aspect of the Berryton affair. A relief centre had been set up in the village hall; the cameras moved from that to show some of the damage up and down the street. It looked as if the place had been bombed; the pavements were strewn with rubble and a lot of houses had lost their windows. Staying indoors was

obviously no protection; in many cases the insects had flown straight through the glass without damaging themselves. One of the most disturbing shots had been taken inside the little church. I remember it very well; the camera tracked down the nave, turning aside to examine odd details, a pew-end scraped by huge jaws, a statue toppled from its niche. Then up across the altar steps, still covered with glass and flowers, and a tilt to show the gaping hole in the east window where one of the attackers had crashed through. The people must have thought they were being chased by devils but God's House had been no sanctuary. It was easy to imagine the painted brightness of stained-glass bursting, the machine-faces peering down . . .

The search for the nests was still going on. The cameras showed lines of men moving across the fields, tanks nosing down narrow lanes. Everything conceivable was being pressed into use; they'd even brought down tracker dogs, and there were mobile radar units engaged in an obviously futile search for tiny flying objects.

The programme closed with some aerial shots of the village. That was where I heard the name Tod and I had coined for ourselves. *"This, then,"* said the commentator impressively, *"is Berryton, scene of perhaps the most unprecedented disaster of modern times. An attack as deadly as it was bizarre, an attack by a new life form that dropped literally from the skies onto this quiet place. Like the Furies of legend they came; and like the Furies, they destroyed . . ."*

I thought of Jane sitting up at Brockledean House watching the show with the old people. I'd have liked to see her but she'd said no, and she knew what she was doing.

They found the nests early next morning, in wooded country some six or eight miles from Berryton, and at lunchtime the BBC announced officially that the menace had been wiped out.

A day or so later I went up to London and when I got back Jane announced that tomorrow I was taking an afternoon off. She said the break would do me good, she'd bring some food over and we could go out in the car.

When I looked at the calendar I had a shock. It was the date set for the Neptune Test; all the excitement had driven it out of my mind.

The blast was scheduled for just after two p.m., our time. I remember sitting in my kitchen and watching the clock hands creep up to the hour. It was a fine day, with cumulus drifts chasing each other across the sky. I don't know what I was expecting but nothing happened of course; the clock chimed softly, a breeze moved the window curtains, a bird chuckled outside the open door. A few minutes later I heard Jane coming up the path.

She was wearing a new white dress; she'd put her hair up and she was looking very adult and ladylike. I think the afternoon out was intended to be something in the way of a leave-taking; she'd said her parents were flying back from the Continent at the end of the week. It was a depressing thought, I tried not to let it spoil things.

We drove to the Downs ten or twelve miles from Brockledean. We walked a good distance then circled back and unpacked the things she'd brought. I don't know what I've have done if I'd known that earthquake shocks were ripping their way round the globe to us at God knows how many miles a minute. I like to think I'd still have had a picnic . . .

After a meal we found a little pub. We sat and talked till it was time to head back. I drove slowly; I wasn't in any hurry for the day to end. Half an hour later I swung the Jag into my gateway and killed the engine. Jane got out. She said "Well I suppose that's about it. Thanks for everything Bill, it's been lovely."

I looked at my watch. Just after eight. "Like to have coffee before you go, love? It isn't too late."

She said "I shouldn't really, I ought to be getting back . . ." Then she grinned. "All right then. It won't take long, will it?"

I said "Fix it in a moment." I walked toward the house. Everything was very still; somewhere a plane was droning but that was the only sound. Halfway to the front door I stopped. Jane was still standing by the car. I said "What's the matter?"

"I—I don't know." Her voice sounded small. "Suddenly everything feels wrong . . ."

The air was tingling as if it was electrified. I felt the back of my neck prickle. I said "I'll just check you haven't left anything around, then I'll run you home." I felt in my pockets for my keyring. The droning was louder.

I got the door unlocked before I realized. I whipped round again and one look was enough. I yelled at the top of my voice. "Jane, for Christ's sake . . . run . . ."

She turned back briefly then she was pelting toward me with Sek gathering speed behind. I yanked the door open and they fell through it together. Sek spun in her own length and barked. To her it was still a game ; she hadn't seen what was after us.

I got a glimpse of them clearing the hedge on the far side of the road. Six or eight vast insects, converging on the house. I saw black and yellow armour, the blur of wings. I slammed the door and something hit it with a crash that nearly fetched it off its hinges. The wood was stout, it saved our lives. There was another blow ; a panel split and yellow legs came reaching and quivering through, and black antennae thicker than the base of my thumb. Sek dived past me and I heard Jane scream. A confused sort of fight developed, the dog leaping up snapping and slavering, the wasp trying to wedge its body through the gap, arcing its abdomen to bring the sting into play.

I backed off glaring about for a weapon, anything I could use. There was another crash from behind me and a tinkling of glass. Something landed with a thump on the kitchen floor. I jumped round and had my first sight of a Fury.

It had come through the window, carrying glass and glazing bars in front of it. The concussion seemed to have stunned it momentarily. It crouched on the floor, quivering ; its puppy head with the great bulges of the compound eyes seemed to be staring straight at me. I had time to see the patternings on its body, the veins in the wings thick as knitting needles. Then the mouthparts twitched, the wings boomed and it was airborne and coming at my face.

In the hall there was a heavy gateleg table. I can't

remember picking it up and I certainly don't remember throwing it but I saw it hit the thing full in the mask. The wasp went down in a tangle of legs and I heard a bedroom window shatter, then another. Sek was still baying at the front door ; the house was full of noise.

Jane was pressing herself against the wall. Her eyes were wide and one hand was on her throat. I grabbed her wrist and dragged her toward the cellar. I opened the door and snapped the light on so she could see the steps. She stumbled past me. Sek was darting at something crawling down the staircase ; I yelled at her and she came. I pulled the door shut behind her and locked it. I stood panting with my hands against the wood ; I heard drummings and tappings outside, then another noise, a sort of steady scraping and crunching. There was no doubt what they were doing ; I'd seen wasps on old fence posts often enough, gouging away at the wood. If these brutes set their minds to it they'd have us within minutes.

I backed down the steps. A long splinter fell away from the door, then a hole appeared. It enlarged steadily till I could see yellow mouthparts working like the beaks of parrots. I put my arm round Jane's shoulders. She half turned ; she squeezed my hand almost absent-mindedly then her eyes went back to the door. We both watched the incredible death working its way toward us.

Sek walked forward stiff-legged until she was between us and the steps. She was rumbling a deep threat and her neck hair had risen till it looked like she was wearing a shawl. I saw her shoulder muscles bunching. The first of the wasps that came down stood a good chance of being torn to bits but the rest would get us easily.

The hole was big enough now for us to see the head of a Fury staring through. I made myself look at Jane. She was white but she wasn't crying. I tried to speak but nothing would come.

Her voice was a little tight thread of sound. She said "Could we hurt their eyes . . . ?"

It was a tiny hope but it was enough to get me moving again. There was an old rake handle leaning against the cellar wall. The head of the tool had rusted away but the

shaft was still iron-tipped. I grabbed it and worked my way back up the steps. The door was creaking and bulging and more splinters were appearing near the edge. I braced myself and jabbed the weapon through the hole; the Fury's head vanished, then bobbed back. I lashed out again and felt something grip the pole. I tried to snatch it free but the opposing muscles were stronger than mine. I heaved and the thing parted abruptly, sheared through by one of those hellish sets of mandibles. I lost my balance and fell back on top of Sek. We hit the floor together. I lay feeling dazed; above me the cellar light started to swing.

I stared at it stupidly. The movement increased; the globe reached the end of its arc, jiggled and swept back, almost brushing the ceiling. Shadows surged up and down the walls. I realized the floor was vibrating. There was a noise, distant at first but growing louder; a sort of clattering roar, like a tube train coming out of a tunnel.

The light went out abruptly. In the blackness the racket seemed ten times worse. I felt myself tilted first one way then the other. I couldn't think; I didn't realize we were in the meizoseismal area of an earthquake, I just had no idea what was happening. I heard Sek start to howl then her voice was lost. I shouted to her but she couldn't have heard. The real Sekhmet was baying too close underneath . . .

I forgot the Furies. All I wanted to do was get out before we were buried alive. I started for the steps on my hands and knees and collided with a wall. I clawed myself upright and tried to work along it. The bricks slid away from me then came back and hit me in the chest. I cannoned into a pile of boxes and after that I didn't know where I was. I sat up and a fresh shock rolled me into a corner. A weight thumped across my legs and I felt hands clutching. I yelled "Jane . . ." She moved convulsively; hair fell across my face. I hung on to her, shouting crazy things she couldn't hear. I felt the earth would split and plunge us down a thousand miles into the mouth of the thing that was roaring. I don't know how long the din went on.

While we lay there a planet was breaking apart. The test

did go wrong ; it cracked the bed of the sea, raised a volcano the height of Vesuvius where before there'd been a five mile Deep. The destruction wouldn't have been so bad had not Russia exploded a device of equal power almost within minutes of the first ; some scientists claim the Earth literally wobbled on her axis under the double blow. Ripples from the huge focii spread across the globe, starting secondary slips that in turn set off others and still more. Countries and cities on or near fault lines suffered most ; Lisbon was reduced to rubble, Japan was practically wiped out. Italy, China and Peru were torn apart ; the Chedrang Fault, that had wrecked Assam at the end of the last century, became the centre of another huge disturbance while in America the San Andreas Rift opened into a maw five hundred miles long and wider than the Grand Canyon. San Francisco slid wholesale into the earth ; then the Pacific broke in, changing the shape of the continent for all time. In Great Britain, the Great Glen was convulsed along its entire course from Inverness to Fort William ; Loch Lomond vanished overnight, and most of Herefordshire became a inland sea. The Thames Valley flattened into a flood plain ; London was drowned . . .

The noise stopped. I lay still a long time ; very slowly, normal sounds began to reassert themselves. Something was snuffling nearby and I heard the drip and splash of water. I put my hand out tentatively and touched rough fur. I said "Sek . . ."

Jane whimpered and clung tighter. I tried to make her sit up. "Come on, love, it's over. Don't be scared . . ."

She moaned something. Her head was burrowing against my chest, I didn't hear what she said. I pushed her shoulders. "It's gone now, Jane. Sek's here."

She moved at that. Warmth and pressure vanished, leaving a vacuum. She said indistinctly "Oh, God . . . Bill?"

"It's all right. Are you hurt?"

"I . . . I don't think so. What about you?"

"I'm fine." I tried to move my legs and found I couldn't.

I tried not to panic. I said "I think I'm stuck." Sek nuzzled at me and I pushed her away. I heaved ; something creaked, and the pressure on my ankles got worse. I said

"Matches. In my pocket. Can you reach, I can't get my arm round . . ."

The air was thick with dust, I could feel it catching my throat. Jane started to cough. Her hands touched me, tentatively then more firmly. She said "You're lying on your jacket . . ."

I managed to sit up a bit. There was a fumbling, a flare of yellow light. I saw her face. Two huge dark eyes. Sek towering over her like a spirit from the Pit. She said again "Bill, are you hurt?"

"No, just stuck . . . hold the light down."

The dust was moving in whorls, it was hard to see. There seemed to be a beam across my legs. One end was propped on a pile of masonry and another mass was hanging through the floor just above. By turning my feet sideways I might just wriggle clear. The match went out and I swore; Jane lit another. She said "There aren't many left, Bill; they won't last long."

I was feeling the beam with my hands. "Try and find a lever. Something you can ram under this thing. For God's sake be careful though or we shall have all that other lot down on our heads."

The second match went out and Jane spoke in darkness. "It was an earthquake, wasn't it? The big bomb must have done it . . ."

"Yes, I think so . . . can you find anything?"

She said "This might do . . ." I heard vague movements and the weight on my legs eased a little. Something fell with a crash. I lay still again, afraid to move, and felt her working at my ankles. "What are you doing?"

She said "Taking your shoes off."

Good for her, I hadn't even thought of it . . . I pulled, and one foot came free. The other was still caught. Jane levered at the beam again. It creaked and settled ominously but I was able to snatch myself clear. She groped for me at once and put my shoes in my hand. She said "There may be broken glass . . ."

I stood up awkwardly; Sek rubbed against me and I reached down to pat her. Jane said "Can I use another match? I daren't move far because of this silly beam."

"All right, be careful . . ."

She climbed back over to me. "Where's that water?"

"Don't know. Hold the light."

She raised the match over her head. I saw a glint on the far wall. Water was coursing down the bricks; a good-sized puddle had collected already. I said "Damaged main . . ."

"Fine" said Jane disgustedly. "We shall be drowned next."

"I don't think so . . . give me the matches a minute."

She put them in my hand. I said "Keep still, going to look for candles."

"Have we got any?"

"There were some in a box by the steps. It had all sorts of junk in it . . . Only saw it the other day." I was in luck; I uncovered the tin, wrenched the lid off, found a candle. It was broken in a couple of places but it was still a Godsend. I coaxed it alight and held it up. We could take stock of ourselves at last.

We'd been very fortunate; I had a small cut on my hand and a pair of well-bruised shins, Jane had grazed her knee but apart from that we weren't hurt. We were both filthy of course and Sek's back and shoulders were yellow with dust. We brushed ourselves down as well as we could and started to look round the cellar. I held the candle up under the rent in the ceiling. There were other boards lying at an angle across the hole. I realized after a moment or so I was looking at the back of the big dresser that had stood in the kitchen. My brain was beginning to function again; I said "I'm afraid the house must have fallen in. We must be under a pile of rubble or there'd be light coming through somewhere."

Jane shook her head. "Perhaps it's dark out there. What's the time?"

I looked at my watch. It had stopped at nine fifteen. We'd been in the cellar longer than I realized. I said "You could be right . . . thing is, what are we going to do? We can't stay here for ever."

She opened her mouth to answer then stopped. She put her hand on my arm. "Shhh . . ."

I listened. Then I heard the noise that had startled her. A shifty, stealthy sort of tapping and scraping. I was reminded of Blind Pew's stick. The sound passed over our heads, moved to where I guessed the kitchen door had been and died away. Sek rumbled in her throat and I put my hand on her collar. Jane said bitterly "*They're still there.*"

We listened for a long time at the bottom of the steps. There was nothing else. Jane brightened up. "I think they've all gone. Perhaps they were killed in the earthquake and that was the last one sort of dragging itself away. In any case wasps sleep at night, don't they?"

I wasn't sure, and didn't feel much like finding out by experiment. I was dubious about opening that door, and said as much. Still, it had to be done sometime. I walked up to it very quietly and peered through the hole the Furies had gouged. There was light outside, blue and vague. Impossible to see anything clearly. I listened but apart from the water in the cellar there wasn't a sound. I turned the key gently and eased the door open. It moved six inches then jammed. Something had evidently fallen across outside. I took a deep breath and banged the door with my shoulder. There was a grating noise and it gave another foot. After that I couldn't budge it.

Jane was standing just behind me. She said "Let me try. I'm a lot smaller than you. I might be able to wriggle out."

I said "Steady, we still don't know whether the things have gone."

"It's all right, I'll only look." She edged forward. She was quiet for a moment; then, "There's a beam wedging it and a great lot of bricks and stuff. I think if I moved some of them you could get through. There aren't any wasps. Everything's in an awful mess though."

I'd expected that. I said "Go on then. But be careful." She eeled her way round the door and I heard her start to move rubble. As she worked she eased forward until only her legs were in sight. She was gasping and squirming trying to shift some extra-large obstacle when I saw her stiffen. At the same time I heard a sound I was already beginning to dread. The booming of great narrow wings . . .

I shouted and Jane tried to wriggle backward. Her dress caught on a nail. I grabbed her round the waist and yanked. She yelped; the cloth tore and we both came down the steps with a rush. Above us the door was driven shut with a good solid crash. I heard tapping and scraping for a moment then silence. Jane clenched her fists. She said "Damn, damn, damn . . . They're still there. I saw it flying down."

I was sweating. I said "Are you hurt, love?"

"No, just scraped and bumped about and getting bad-tempered. You were right Bill, we're here for the night."

The Fury seemed to have given up its efforts at the door. Maybe they did get sleepy after dark. I went up and turned the key in the lock anyway, then we piled boxes on the steps. Not much of a barrier but we had nothing else to use. We tried to find somewhere to make ourselves comfortable.

That wasn't easy. The broken main was still pumping water into our hideout; it was three or four inches deep already on the lowest part of the floor. In one of the walls was a round-topped alcove three feet or so across and raised eighteen inches from the ground. We climbed into it; at least it would keep our feet dry. I'd found some more stubs of candle; I took them with me. Sek looked at us quizzically then got up herself, turned round somehow and lay in front of us facing out into the dark. I was glad of that; there wasn't much room with the three of us there but I thought that was all to the good. Before morning it was going to get plenty chilly.

Jane sat and brooded, smutty chin in her hands. Her hair had come partly undone; it was hanging over her cheek. I said "Don't worry, it probably won't be long before someone comes and digs us out anyway."

She shook her head. "They won't. Not for a long time."

"Course they will, when they see the house. They don't just leave things like that. There'll be rescue teams."

She said tightly "They'll all be too busy to bother. Their houses will have fallen down too."

It was rather like a punch in the stomach. I realized she was right; I'd been thinking of the disaster in purely local terms. We had no means of telling how far the

damage spread; it could be and probably was country-wide. I felt in sudden need of a smoke. By chance I'd had a packet of cigarettes in my jacket. I found it and took one out. It was battered but usable. I lit it from the candle and Jane stirred slightly. She said "Could you spare one of those?"

I was startled. "You don't smoke, do you?"

She shook her head. "Not usually. But I want one now."

I said "Here . . ." I gave her a light. She blew smoke; then she leaned her head back against the wall and closed her eyes. Suddenly she looked unutterably weary. She said "I've got it all worked out. There won't be anybody. Not for a long, long, time."

We finished the cigarettes in silence; then we tried to get some rest. I think up to then that was the most uncomfortable night I'd ever spent. As the water in the cellar got deeper it began to gurgle and splash; I sat up a score of times convinced I'd heard the tapping of a clawed foot. The Furies were supposed to have been destroyed; that was pretty small comfort right at the minute. I wondered how many of them there were, and why they hunted humans so viciously. Was it for food? I tried to remember what wasps ate. I had an idea they liked meat . . . When I did doze I dreamed of a black and yellow mask that floated toward me, jaws clicking steadily. The third or fourth time it happened I woke up. The candle had gone out; the darkness was absolute. I felt about cautiously, found another stub and lit it. Small as it was, the flame was comforting. In the dark, anything could happen . . . I looked at my watch. It still read nine fifteen. I undid the strap and laid the thing down beside me. If there's anything I hate it's a watch that doesn't go. I'd rather be without it.

Jane sighed and I saw her eyes were open. I said "What's the matter love, can't sleep?"

"No." She shuddered. "I'm cold . . ."

I tried to wrap my jacket round her. It was the best I could do. I got a cigarette out, reached down and held the tip over the candle flame. I said "Do you want to smoke again?"

"No . . ." A pause. Then, "Is it nearly light?"

"I don't know. I think it must be."

Miles beneath us, the earth groaned. It was a thick noise; somehow it sounded full of pain. I felt her tense. She said "Oh, no . . . Please don't let it start again . . ."

"It won't. These are after-shocks. It won't happen again." I hoped I was right.

She rubbed her face tiredly. She said "There was something about that noise. I made a fool of myself. I'm not normally like that."

"You didn't."

She said "I did, I was yelling my silly head off."

"It didn't matter. So was I."

She wriggled slightly. She said "I'm glad you were there Bill, I'd have gone mad on my own."

I could have said the same. I was praying we weren't in for another 'quake. The noise came again, like the baffled grumbling of an animal. The candle flame trembled; then the sound died away. I said "In bulls does the Earthshaker delight."

"Who?"

"Poseidon, I think. Homer."

She made an effort to change the subject. "Do you know much poetry?"

"A bit."

She said "I love it. I was going to do Eng. Lit. at College if I could. Shakespeare and all that jazz."

"You still can."

She didn't answer. I started softly on what I could remember of the Dream. She picked me up after a while and we worked through Shakespeare to Keats and Tennyson. It made the time pass quicker at least. I was in the middle of a fairly spirited rendering of the Morte d'Arthur when I felt her head go heavy against my shoulder. A short time later I slept myself.

When I woke again I could dimly see the things in the cellar. A thin beam of sunlight was coming through one of the cracks in the floor above and touching the wall. The angle of it told me two things; that it wasn't long after daybreak, and that the house had no east gable. I listened intently but there were no sounds. Just a sort of breathing

quiet. There should have been a dawn chorus. A line of poetry was still running through my mind. 'And no birds sing . . .' I shivered, and woke Jane. We set about fighting our way out.

CHAPTER THREE

I had a stubble of beard and I ached as if I'd tried to sleep on a bed of nails. I felt personally ready to face any number of Furies rather than spend any more time in that damned cellar. We sloshed through a foot of icy water to get to the steps; I opened the door the original amount and Jane peered out. Nothing moved. She said "I think it's all right, I'll go and have a look."

I caught her wrist. "No you don't. Come back for a minute."

"Somebody's got to go first."

"Yes, but it's not going to be you. Here, Sek."

She walked up the steps and stood looking at me. I patted the edge of the door. "Up, girl." She hesitated then squeezed through. There were sounds of scrambling, and a shower of rubble came down. We waited for barking or the noise of a fight. Everything stayed quiet. After a couple of minutes I nodded to Jane. "All right, it must be OK. Let me out before you do anything else."

She wriggled through and started removing the rest of the bricks that were wedging the door. When she'd freed it enough I forced it back and climbed out.

I don't know what I expected to see but I know I got a shock. I stood up in a bomb site. The house was roofless, two walls had completely gone and a third was only half its former height. Odd things stuck out of the chaos, incongruous against a background of trees and fields; my drawing board, a hatstand with a coat still on one of the hooks, the taps that had fed the kitchen sink. The air was sweet and still and the early-morning sun lay across the grass, touching everything with gold.

I said "Well, it was a good house while it lasted." I sat on a heap of rubble and lit a cigarette. Jane came and put her hand on my shoulder, stood looking down and

frowning. For once she seemed at a loss for words. I smoked the fag through and stamped it out. I wanted to just stay where I was but that was no good. We had to shift about, decide what to do. I tried to remember that we had in fact been lucky ; without a doubt, the earthquake had saved our lives.

We discussed things quietly. The silence was total and ominous ; no cars, no planes. It looked as if the country round about had been pretty badly hit. Also it was harbouring an indefinite number of Furies, all of which could be expected to kill on sight. Jane said if we could get across to Brockledean we could hole up for days ; the place was well stocked with food and there were cellars that could be made virtually impregnable. We decided our best bet was to stay around for a time at least and see what if anything happened ; if things stayed quiet we could risk a dash across the fields later on. Jane kept a lookout while I excavated the remains of the larder. I unearthed a loaf of bread and a couple of tins of luncheon meat, the sort that have openers already fixed to them. I unzipped them and gave one to Sek while we shared the other, washing it down with beer. Not an ideal breakfast but it was the best we could do. Afterwards we went round to the Jag. Any hopes I might have had of making a getaway were promptly crushed. Her windscreen was smashed, and there wasn't much doubt about how it had happened. The Furies evidently employed their battering-ram tactics against cars as well as buildings ; any normal form of transport would be little better than a mobile death trap.

We were still standing in the drive when we heard a droning in the distance. We beat it for the partial safety of the cellar. Three Furies came into sight but they weren't interested in us. They were diving at something running beneath them ; as they got closer I saw their quarry was a pair of terrified sheep. They brought them down a couple of hundred yards away, in the field at the back of the house. We watched cautiously ; Jane lay with her fists clenched until the sheep stopped kicking. The wasps moved over the carcasses for some time, tapping them with their antennae. Then they began to butcher the animals. They worked fast and efficiently ; after a while four more

brutes arrived, grabbed red lumps of flesh in their claws and winged off heavily to the west. Half an hour later they'd all gone and nothing remained but the fleeces, stacked neatly on the grass. I swallowed; at least what I'd seen settled any doubts I might have had about their food requirements. I'd had some idea of skulking as far as the village: I put it right out of my mind.

For the time being there was nothing to do but wait. Furies were seldom out of earshot; they sounded like cars on a distant racing circuit. There were no more earth tremors. At midday we raided the ruins again; the stove was still functioning and we boiled water for coffee though we didn't dare risk cooking. Some time in the afternoon a squadron of a dozen or more insects flew directly over the house; we got ready to run but they kept on course and were soon out of sight. From time to time I tried the radio; I picked up a babble of French, and what sounded like German, but nothing in English. The BBC wavelengths were quiet.

Once we heard firing, automatic weapons of some sort. The noise came to us flat and muted by heat. It was a hopeful sign; it was good to think that somebody, somewhere, was taking the offensive. We listened for a long while after the guns had stopped but there were no other sounds.

I think it was probably about four o'clock when Jane turned her head sharply and raised her hand. Sek got up and came to us, stood looking fixedly in the direction of the lane. We stayed where we were for a moment, staring at each other and wondering, then I got up and ran to the gate. I saw the most welcome sight of my life.

An armoured car was moving down the lane. It was coming carefully, not making above ten or fifteen miles an hour. I could see the thick muzzle of the quick-firer, the commander and gunner sitting in the turret. Both men were carrying weapons that at first sight I took to be sub-machine guns, then I realized they were flamethrowers. I'd never handled one but there was no mistaking the shoulder packs, the squat tubes with triggers and hand-grips. It looked as if the Army was moving in prepared to meet trouble much more than halfway.

Jane whooped and ran past me with Sek at her heels. The car stopped opposite the gate, nearly filling the lane. The commander looked very young; he was hatless, with straight fair hair that hung across his forehead. He shouted over the noise of the engine. "Many of you here?"

"Just the two of us."

"Been here long?"

"Since the 'quake. This is my house. Or was."

He said curtly "Very bad luck. Seen any wasps?"

"A few. They haven't come too near."

He spoke into the intercom and the engine stopped. He swung out onto the armour and dropped down to the road. He said "Keep that lookout going will you, don't want any more surprise parties."

"Sir."

He wiped his face with his hand, reached into his pocket and produced a hammered-looking pack of cigarettes. He said "Got any water sir? We need water and petrol pretty urgently."

I said "We've got a cellarful of water, you can help yourselves. Nearest garage is a couple of miles away, in Brockledean. I'm Bill Sampson by the way, this is Miss Beddoes-Smythe."

Jane said formally "Nice to see you, Lieutenant. Thank Heaven the Army's here."

He looked at her for a moment. Then he said "Connor. Neil Connor. Glad to know you." He turned back to the car. "Alan, get down here with a couple of cans will you? We'll see to the water first." The driver climbed through the hatch. "Like to show us where it is sir?"

Jane said quickly "It's in the cellar. It's hard to get in because the door's blocked. Shall I take him?"

I nodded. "Carry on love." She said to the driver "This way please," exactly as if she was conducting a guest at some high-class garden party.

They trotted off down the drive and round the corner of the house.

I said "Lieutenant, can you give me any idea of what's going on?"

He said "Wish I could, old boy. To be frank, I'd like

to know myself. You're the first people we've seen today. Alive at least."

I had a horrible thought. "You're not on your own, are you?"

He said "Cigarette?"

"Thanks . . ."

We lit up. He said "Sorry to disappoint you, there's only us. And we're damned lucky to be operational."

"Where have you come from?"

He was evasive. "We were on manoeuvres. A couple of Saladins, half a dozen APC's and some light stuff." He hesitated. "We were on the Plain about ten miles from here when the 'quake started. There was a bit of a flap. Before we could sort ourselves out the wasps were down. They did rather well. Couldn't fight them, they were everywhere at once."

My throat felt dry. I said "So what happened?"

He paused again but it seemed once started he couldn't stop. "My car was the only one that made it. We managed to get her going and went for the bloody things. Not a scrap of good; they were all over the place, with our people tangled up among them. We got out and left them to it. The brutes have been on the rampage, I tell you. There isn't a village intact for ten miles. Luckily we've got flame. The only thing that stops them. They couldn't resist us for a time. Like moths round an outsize candle. We grounded scores, then they sheered off. Haven't been able to raise our base since last night, God knows what's happening there."

I felt my back start to go cold. The arrival of the Army had seemed like the end of all our worries, but we were no better off than we had been before. Jane and the driver came back while we were still talking. She said brightly "Would your people like some tea, Lieutenant? I thought you might be glad of a break."

He looked at his watch and shrugged. "Won't make any difference now, we shan't get to Swyreford before dark. OK by you sir?"

I nodded. "Glad to be of help."

We talked in the remains of the kitchen. I squatted on a pile of rubble with Sek at my feet, Neil sat on the remains

of the dresser, the driver leaned against what was left of the wall. The gunner stood guard just outside, the tube of the flamethrower in his hands. I said "The damage is pretty widespread then?"

Neil lit his second cigarette. "We've taken most of the day coming ten miles. Bloody great crevasses everywhere, of all things. No crossing 'em without bridging gear, we just had to backtrack each time, find a way round. The wasps held us up for a while of course. We did quite well at first with the flamethrowers but they swamped us, we had to shut down. We were stuck then, brutes so thick on us we couldn't use the 'scopes. Couldn't drive, if they hadn't lifted off we'd still be there."

"Why did they leave?"

"Don't ask me. I don't know what goes on in their rotten little minds. One minute they were banging and tapping all over us, the next they were up and away. The whole crowd of them, as if they'd got a recall signal from somewhere. They left one of their little people on top of course, ready for us when we popped up. Rather clever. Unfortunately for him we heard him trotting about; we came out pretty smartly and warmed him up before he could do very much. The flamethrowers rather stop the brutes in their tracks, they don't seem to care for them at all."

Underlining his words came a thudding growl. The house shook; somewhere something slipped and crashed down. The ground quivered; my scalp prickled and Sek rolled her lips back from her teeth. I put my hand on her collar; the tremor died away.

I swallowed. I said "And you're headed back to Swyre-ford?"

"Yes. Only thing possible. We're virtually helpless as it is."

Jane turned round sharply. "Good Lord. We thought we were in a bad way. But you've got armour."

He smiled crookedly. "How about you sir, what do you intend to do?"

I was still trying to fight down a hollow feeling of panic. It was impossible to adjust rapidly enough, I was only just beginning to realize the scale of the disaster. I said "I

don't know, Lieutenant. I frankly don't know what to do for the best."

Jane looked up with a cup in her hand. "Could you take us with you?"

He laughed. "There strictly isn't room for passengers. Sorry."

She looked at me keenly, then back to him. "Aren't there any more of you? No more cars?"

He hesitated and I said "It's all right, she isn't under any illusions. No, Jane, there aren't any more. The wasps got to them last night. The Lieutenant is trying to get back to his base."

She said "Where are all the others then?"

"Scattered round the Plain. There aren't any driv——"
An idea hit me and I faltered. "There aren't any drivers."

She beat me to it. She said "You can take Bill there, he'll drive one. He drove tanks in the Army, didn't you Bill?"

Neil looked at me sharply. "That true sir?"

I said "Well, yes. On my National Service."

He said "You wouldn't really want to see me shot would you?" He stubbed the cigarette carefully. "We've broken enough Queen's Regs as it is. Stocked up with grub at a little village shop this morning. Nobody to stop us but God knows it was still looting. Couldn't get near our own stores, still crawling with insect life. There'll be the very Devil to pay if this lot ever gets sorted out. Thanks, m'dear." That to Jane as she passed him a cup of tea.

She stood back and pushed at her dark hair. She said "I'm sorry there isn't a handle but we've got almost no crockery left. If you leave us here we shall be killed."

I was beginning to see a way out to somewhere, Heaven knew where. I said "That's enough Jane."

She said startlingly "I don't care, it's bloody well true." Her voice was firm but she was trembling slightly.

I said "Finish the tea, will you love? We shall be all right." She swung away angrily. I looked back at Neil. "Where the Hell are the brutes coming from? I thought they'd been wiped out."

He had been staring at Jane. He turned looking vaguely

surprised. "I don't know. All this lot blew up yesterday, we'd only just moved in when they hit us."

I said "If you could find the nests, lob a bit of H.E. down on top. If they're exposed, use flame . . ."

He shook his head. "If there are any Brass left at Swyreford they'll want to know what's going on. Do more good down there than starting private wars in Wiltshire."

I walked back with him to the Saladin. He turned as he was about to climb aboard. He said "Who's the girl?"

"She comes from the big house just this side of the village. Only the housekeeper and her husband there. From what I've heard I'd rather keep her with me."

"What about her parents?"

"They're abroad."

He said "Hmm. Hell of a responsibility. Still it might be best in the long run. Nice kid, look after her."

"We'll make out."

He bit his lip thoughtfully. "Look, I hate to slide off like this but I haven't got much choice. You'd best stay under cover as far as possible, if you see any of the brutes keep very quiet. If there's a chance at all I'll send somebody back to you. Don't count on a thing though. Impossible to say what'll happen now this lot's started."

I nodded at the *flammenwerfer*. "It wasn't a manoeuvre, was it?"

He frowned. "I think you should know the situation as far as possible. Obviously we didn't have these things with us to boil the dixies. We were sent down in a Hell of a hurry as soon as the flap started. Unfortunately we were pretty badly beaten up ; if the other units didn't get on any better we're in the worst sort of trouble. We know there are at least a score of nests operating on the Plain and there are sightings from the New Forest and some more in Somerset. The Forest is nearly stripped of ponies. In the west there aren't any sheep. And yesterday there were reports of three empty villages." He spread his hands. "Just deserted. Cleaned out. Last I heard, our people were occupying them. We were told to keep things quiet but under the circumstances that seems a little pointless. Only fair you should have the facts ; if you make any decisions, at least you'll have something to go on. Sorry I can't paint

a nicer picture." He held his hand out. "Goodbye, and good luck." A few moments later the Saladin revved thunderously and moved off toward Brockledean.

I watched it out of sight, then I turned back to the house. I was sweating a little; there wasn't much doubt in my mind as to what had happened to the animals. There was still a pile of fleeces out there where we'd watched the Furies working. I had a nagging fear the same fate had overtaken the missing people. What I'd been told made it more important than ever to get away. We were right in the middle of something very, very nasty and I was going to get Jane and myself out of it if it was humanly possible. I'd been sitting around long enough.

She came to meet me. She said "What was he saying before he left? He looked terribly serious."

I said "He was terribly serious. Come inside for a minute, I want to talk to you."

She said "I thought it was all over. When I saw the car coming . . ."

I said "Yes, so did I. But I think we can do something to help ourselves now." I told her, quickly, what Neil had said to me. She listened tight-lipped. Then she said soberly "I think our only chance is to get out for the time being at least. But I shall have to go to Brockledean first because of the Carters."

I nodded. "We'll do that. But not just yet. First of all I'm going to whip one of those bloody cars he was talking about, if I can find his camp."

She looked at me sharply. "I thought you might, that's why I shut up. But there'll be a terrible row if you're caught. That's Government property after all. He said you could be shot, he probably wasn't joking."

I shrugged. "We'll worry about that later. Now I want you to stay here. As soon as I get back——"

She said quickly "I'm coming with you."

"You're not, sorry love. No point two of us risking our necks."

"But——"

I said "No buts. That's definite. Don't make things harder Jane." She started to argue again and I shut her up. This was one time she was going to listen. I said "I

think I shall be OK, I'll tell you why. The wasps aren't interested in this part of the country any more. They've beaten up all the villages and given the Army a terrible hiding, they'll be far too busy right now to keep flying round just to see if there's anybody left. You know we haven't heard any for hours. Now what I'm going to do is drive the Jag to Brockledean and find out just what's happened. It may not be too bad over there anyway, in which case I'll come straight back. If it is bad, I'll get some petrol and go and look for that camp he was talking about. It can't be too hard to find. I'll get one of the cars and come back here. Then we can go and see about your people."

She opened her mouth then shut it again. She said "All right Bill." She swallowed. "What do you want me to do if you don't come back?"

"I shall come back. But if I'm held up, wait till night and try to get home by yourself, if you're not here I'll come to Brockledean for you. Whatever else you do, don't move till it gets dark. Leave it till about eleven. OK?"

She nodded dumbly.

One of the things I didn't want to do was run straight into the Saladin again. I let about forty minutes pass ; after that my nerves wouldn't stand any more waiting. I'd decided to leave Sek at the house ; if I was attacked in the car her presence wouldn't make much difference one way or the other. I'd found her leash ; I put her on it and gave the loop to Jane. She looked dubious but I knew the dog would stay with her. I went out to the Jag, started up and backed into the lane. Jane came round to the driving window. It looked like she wasn't far from crying. I put my hand out and she gripped it hard. She said "Try and come back." Then she ran for the house, towing Sek behind her. I let in the clutch and moved away wondering if I would see her again.

It was queer to be driving once more. The broken screen gave me a horribly unprotected feeling ; at first I kept peering up in the sky and out the side windows, trying to spot possible attackers. I forced myself to stop it. It was literally pointless, if there was anything out there I would know about it soon enough.

I reached the line of trees at the end of the lane and drove underneath them, turned onto the main road and speeded up a little. Brockledean came into sight in the distance. At first the houses looked undamaged but most of them were little more than shells. The Jag bumped heavily over a crack in the road ; I saw by the remains of a fence that there had been a lateral displacement of five feet or more. The land had crept and crawled, wrenching foundations apart.

There was an eerie quality about the damage, a sort of mad playfulness that made my back creep. One cottage had lost its end wall ; I saw a bedstead hanging out supported by a mess of beams. Farther on a dressing table, its mirror intact, stood upright in a flowerbed. The "Royal Oak" halfway down the street on the right, had completely collapsed. The tallest thing in the ruins was a piano. The keys were splintered and across them was a great splash of something that looked like dried blood. It was as if the thing had been kicked in the mouth.

As I got nearer the village centre I began to see bodies. They were sprawled everywhere, legs and arms pushed up stiffly to the sky. There was one man I'd known very well from the pub. He was sitting against the wall of the house with his hands locked round his throat. I can still remember his face, staring horrified over a dark red bib.

The garage was a pretty, low-fronted little place. Virginia creeper trailed round the nameboard and the one stilt-legged pump. I pulled up outside, stopped the engine and got out. Nothing moved ; flies droned in the stillness. I saw the pump cover had been forced and the filler nozzle still trailed on the ground. There was a broad wet patch where petrol had drained from it. In the middle of the road lay a dead Fury, badly scorched. The tarmac round it was blackened and there was a smell of oil. It looked as if the Saladin had been attacked but had got clear. That was something at least.

Across the street the Post Office had given out an avalanche of thatch, stationery and bottled preserves. There were more corpses ; I walked over and stood looking down at one. Oddly enough I felt no anger or disgust, only

a sort of numbness. I just wanted to see everything, take it all in.

There was something odd about the body, I tried to think what it was. I shook my head slowly. I was no expert but there seemed to be bullet wounds . . .

I crossed the square again to the pump, put the filler nozzle into the Jags tank and started to work the handle forward and back. A few yards away a Land Rover was parked, drawn up off the road. I'd half filled my car before it dawned on me I was wasting my time. The Rover would be much handier for what I had in mind. I went over to it quietly. Subconsciously I was afraid the slightest extra noise would bring a Fury down on me from the clear sky.

Her keys were in the dash and the tank was nearly full. I started the engine; the bark of the exhaust sounded uncomfortably loud. I left my motor with the pump nozzle still in her tank and drove off. I felt a sudden need to be clear of the place; I put my foot down, swerving round the obstructions that half filled the road.

I drove back the way I'd come, waving to Jane as I passed the house. I didn't stop. A mile farther on I got to the first of the crevasses. It was a weird sight in an English lane; it looked to be ten or twelve feet wide and the edges were clear-cut where the macadam had been split. The Saladin had turned onto the road here, I could see where it had smashed through the hedge. The armoured car had blazed a trail easy enough to follow; I kept up a good speed, using the field gears once or twice on the rougher stretches. I was glad I'd collared the Rover, my car would never have gone over dirt like that.

I crossed another lane and there was the plain ahead of me, empty and wide. I pulled in automatically and stopped. I don't think I'd ever felt so alone or so hopeless. Even back in Brockledean there had been some illusion of shelter but if I was attacked out there I wouldn't have any place to hide. And I had no idea where the camp lay. There were marks in the grass ahead of me that looked to have been made by tracked vehicles of some sort but they might easily be a week or more old. It seemed futile to start searching but I had to try. I drove due west, into the levelling sun.

I found the camp. Or a camp. It was sheer blind chance. I'd been driving for half an hour and I was more or less lost when I topped a low rise and saw a huddle of vehicles in the distance, the paler oblongs of tents. The sunlight gleamed on dark green armour.

I stopped the Rover half a mile away and studied the place. I wished I had a good pair of field glasses. I stayed where I was for twenty minutes or so then I started the engine again and crept forward a few yards at a time. When I got closer I killed the ignition and let the Rover coast down, tyres whispering on the grass. My heart started to bang against my ribs. I was a couple of hundred yards from safety and I badly wanted to make it. It would be lousy to come all this way and then run into trouble but if any wasps were still in possession I was through.

I saw there had been another massacre. The bodies lay about, most of them swollen till at a distance they looked like brown and white balloons. The vehicles were on the far side of the tents; another Saladin parked facing away from me, half a dozen Saracen APC's drawn up in a line. I stopped the Rover and force of habit made me set the brake. I got out and started to walk toward the armour, moving silently, ready to bolt the rest of the way if anything got airborne. There was a steady wind blowing; there's always a wind on the Plain. Ahead of me the torn fabric of a tent flapped slowly. Everything else was still.

I rounded the front of the Saladin a foot at a time, then stopped and stared. The driver was still jammed halfway through the trap; the body had swollen so much it had wedged itself. One hand gripped the coaming, the eyes in the puffy face seemed to be looking for something in the distance. It was like a grotesque idol staring out across the Plain.

That got me. I turned away and was sick. Nothing I could do about it. I went down on my hands and knees and gasped. When the spasm was over I walked away without looking back.

I got to the Saracens. Six great cars standing there quietly, waiting. I walked round the first in line; her emergency hatch stood open, the rest were dogged down.

I edged up to the port remembering what Neil had said about rearguards. I was ready for surprises.

It was just as well. As I touched the handle the car came alive with a hollow booming. I slammed the trap on a heart-shaped black and yellow mask. I collapsed against the armour, heard scraping noises from inside. It sounded as if the thing was trying to gouge its way out. I wished it luck.

The second car was clean. Her rear doors stood open. I could see right through her. Three or four rifles and flamethrowers were heaped in the back. She'd do ; I wasn't taking any more chances. I closed her up, went round to the driver's flap, got in and shut the lid. I lay back just savouring the feeling of safety. For twenty-four hours now I'd been living with the fear that something was at my back and it had worn me down. I didn't stay there long, I was too anxious to get back to Jane. I sat up, switched on and pressed the starter.

The engine bellowed then settled to a throb. The APC wasn't as noisy inside as I'd imagined. I had a look at the controls. They seemed straightforward enough ; conventional wheel, throttle, footbrake and clutch, handbrake down there on the left, preselector quadrant . . . I could drive her. The tank gauge was reading a quarter full, that gave her fuel for Brockledean and beyond . . . I opened the flap again, worked myself into the safety harness and selected first. I tapped the clutch, let off the brake and moved away.

She handled well for all her size ; once I got used to the twin-axle steering I began to enjoy driving her. I opened her out across the Plain. The engine rumbled steadily ; the sun was low now, dropping toward the horizon, and the car's long shadow raced ahead. I kept moving as fast as I could, following the tracks again.

CHAPTER FOUR

The light was fading when I stopped outside my house. Jane was jumping up and down by the gate ; I levered myself out of the car and she cannoned into me and

hugged me. She said happily "He kept telling me you'd be all right. I knew you would really but I was still scared."

I saw she wasn't alone. A soldier had come down the path behind her, a burly man with sergeant's stripes on his shoulders and the insignia of an infantry regiment. He was carrying a service rifle. Jane said "This is Ted—I mean Sergeant Willis. He's had an awful time. He's been walking all day, he walked right from Yatley." That was a little market town about ten miles off.

I said "Bill Sampson. Glad to know you." I was feeling caught on the wrong foot; the Saracen was sitting there behind me like ten tons of guilt. I put my hand out and the soldier gripped it briefly. He was red-faced, with bright, direct blue eyes. His voice had a West-Country burr. He said "Pleased to meet you sir. What was it like at camp?"

I said "Pretty bloody awful. I'll tell you later. You're coming along with us, aren't you?"

"If you don't mind."

I said "That's a damned silly crack to start with. Glad to have you." I thought privately that with one regular aboard the thing might look a bit more legal at least.

He said "Where are we makin' for?"

Jane was still hanging onto my arm. I looked at her. "Brockledean first. After that . . ." I shrugged. "I suppose I shall have to find somewhere to turn this ruddy thing in. Can't just plough about the country, I'm a pirate."

He smiled briefly and opened the back doors. Jane and Sek climbed inside. She said "It isn't like the other car. There's a lot of room in this one." The sergeant whistled when he saw the flamethrowers. I said "Can you use one of those nasty things, Ted?"

He nodded. "Just about, I reckon."

"Good, might need them before we've finished. Like to go up to the turret? There's radio gear there, we might try and contact something if there's anything moving."

He started to work his way forward. I closed the doors, walked round and had a last look at the house, then I strapped myself into the driving seat again. Abruptly, we had become mechanized refugees. I started up and moved away.

Ted came through on the intercom almost at once. "How far's this place at Brockledean then?"

"Mile or so. Did Jane tell you the story?"

"Said she'd got some folk there."

I said "We shall have to take a look. Don't think it'll be any good."

"Pretty bad up that way then?"

"Wiped out. Flattened. Everybody killed."

He whistled again. He didn't speak any more.

I steered onto the main road and built up speed. I slowed by the drive to Brockledean House and turned into it. The carriageway was none too wide for the Saracen; she ploughed along, bushes bending and cracking on either side.

The house was a lot bigger than I'd realized, a rambling eighteenth-century place set round with flower beds and lawns. From the outside it didn't look to be badly damaged, most of the roof was intact and it still had some at least of its windows. Others had lost both glass and frames. I'd seen damage like that before. I stopped the car and switched off. Jane called from the back. "Are we there?"

"Yes." I heard a scraping and realized she was trying to unclip the doors. I said sharply "Stay in the car, love. I'll go and have a look. Come along, Ted?"

He was scrambling about behind me. "Got any rounds for these rifles?"

"I didn't think to look. Any in the lockers?"

A grunt. Then, "That's all right." I said "Pass me one through, will you?"

He hesitated a moment, then he did what I asked. He said curtly "Ready when you are."

We climbed down and dropped the hatches after us. We walked across to the house, loading as we went. I felt a lot better with a gun in my hands. The main door stood slightly ajar; Ted put his toe against it and swung it inwards. The hallway beyond was dark. He walked in, stepping quietly. I followed him.

It had been a lovely place, now it was a wreck. Ceilings had fallen, crockery and furniture had smashed. We worked our way through it from room to room, calling as we went, but there was nobody there.

At the back of the house was a glass-roofed loggia half covered by an ornamental vine. Tables and little chairs were set about. We stepped onto it through open French windows and Ted pointed silently with the muzzle of the rifle. There were dark patches of dried blood, marks where some thing had been dragged along. Across the lawn was the half dismembered carcass of an animal. I remembered Jane saying she'd owned a pony.

It wasn't much use standing around. It was almost full night now, if we were attacked we wouldn't see the brutes until they were on top of us. We went back to the Saracen and I opened the rear doors. Jane peered down. She said anxiously "Did you find them?"

I shook my head, feeling singularly helpless. "There isn't anybody there Jane. Nobody at all."

"They might be still hiding . . ."

I said "No, they're not."

She said in a tight little voice "Did you see Brandy? He wouldn't have run away."

I said "I'm sorry Jane, I told you. There isn't anything there."

She was quiet a moment. Then, "I see . . ." She swallowed. "I suppose in a way I was expecting it . . . Can I go inside, Bill, I've just got to get some fresh things . . ."

The sergeant shook his head slightly. I said "You wouldn't like it, love. And it's getting dark. We'd better go."

She climbed back into the APC without another word. I started up and edged back down the drive. Ted spoke on the intercom. "Where are we headed then?"

I was glad to hear his voice. I said "Christ only knows. Got any ideas?"

"No use goin' back Yatley way, I can tell ee that."

I tried to think. "Reckon our best bet is to go on down toward the coast and hope they've got things sorted out a bit before we get there."

He agreed with me. "My base were Colton Forum, reckon that'd be the best way for me too." I turned onto the main road and drove toward Brockledean. I said "Try that radio, will you? There must be something about."

He said "I'll have a go." He didn't sound too optimistic.

He made a contact within a few minutes, probably by sheer chance. I pulled in while he talked. I was glad Neil had put some distance between us ; he'd probably reached camp by now.

The next words burst apart what composure I'd got. The sergeant said "I'm talking to a Saladin. Holed up about a mile to'other side of Brockledean. Commander wants to know if the civvy vehicle contains a man and a girl and a bloody gert dog. Sorry, but he says his name's Connor. Reckons you knows him . . ."

I said involuntarily "Oh my God . . ." I wiped my face. "You know about this car don't you, Ted?"

"Reckon Jane told me most on it."

I said "Right then, what do we do?"

He said promptly "What he says. Haven't got a sight o' choice, have us?" The intercom was quiet for a while. Then, "We're to make contact. Take the first left turn through the village, a few hundred yards on there's a wrecked lorry across the road. Turn right there and keep on over the Plain again. He says there's a sort of hill with a copse o' trees on top, we takes a bearin' on that and there's another copse dead in line. He's in there somewhere. He says to watch it, the ground's cut up bad. That's why he's stopped. Too risky movin' at night with these gert cracks all about."

I sighed. "Tell him we're on our way will you? I expect we shall hear the rest when we get there . . ."

I worked the car through Brockledean. At night it wasn't so bad ; I couldn't see the bodies, just a confusion of shadows. I turned left as ordered and picked out the lorry within a minute or two ; beside it was one of those inimitable holes in the hedge. I steered through and found myself in open ground again. The moon was rising, throwing the long shadow of the car out to one side ; the hill showed up against the skyline, a dark whaleback topped with an irregular clump of trees. I headed toward it. I felt the car lurch almost at once and swung away from the danger. The ground was criss-crossed with ridges and amongst them were crevasses. The resultant of headlights and moonlight was confusing ; I slowed right down, picking my route. The sergeant helped, conning me from the

turret. When I'd come about half a mile a light flashed from ahead and a little to the left. I corrected toward it and flicked my headlamps. It came on steadily.

I made out the bulk of a group of trees; the lamp shone from among them, a calm yellow eye. Someone hailed us; I saw the outline of the Saladin, closed up to within a couple of lengths, stopped and switched off lights and engine. The night was warm, my shirt damp with sweat. I got out of the car feeling I could use a smoke.

Neil met me. He was a darker shadow in the night. A torch flickered briefly on my face; he said "Well then sir, what's the game?"

I said "I . . . drove to the village. After what I'd seen I had to get Jane out somehow or another."

He kept his voice low but he was plenty mad. He said "And now I suppose you want a bloody medal. What do you think you've got there, a mechanized Noah's Ark?"

Behind me I heard Ted's boots scrape on steel. There was the clang of the back doors opening and the tinkle of Sek's lead. I said "Under the circumstances——"

He raised his voice. "Sergeant, will you come down here please?"

"Sir."

He stamped away half a dozen paces, then came back. He said "As I haven't a spare driver I'm leaving Mr. Sampson with the vehicle. We shall be pulling out for Swyreford at first light. I can probably expect to pick up a number of stragglers; when and if I do the girl stays but the dog goes out. I'll leave it to you to see the animal's shot."

I said "Just a minute, that's hardly fair——"

He rounded on me. "As far as I'm concerned you're under orders so don't start any barrackroom lawsuits, there's a good chap. In case you need reminding, this is a state of emergency, that carrier is Government property and this is the Army, not the bloody Canine Defence League. Got it?"

I said "Yes." There wasn't much else I could say.

He said "Very well then, you'd better see about a brew-up. After that you can get some sleep. Work out a watch system with the sergeant here, we don't want any of our

little pets creeping up on us. I'll be over in a few minutes anyway. Want to hear some more about this little jaunt of yours." Unexpectedly, he banged my shoulder. "Under normal circumstances I'd say you put up a fairly good show. As it is I'll just recommend you for hanging as soon as convenient. Nothing personal of course."

I said "Well, thanks a lot."

He walked away. He said "Right then, carry on."

About midnight we got Jane settled down as best we could and climbed back up to the turret. I said I'd take the first watch ; I opened the trap and sat out on top of the armour. The moon was high now, a silver ball riding at the focus of a milky haze of light. The trees were still ; there was no sign of life from the Saladin and the shadows round her wheels were inky black. The night was utterly silent, not even the cry of a hunting bird. I had the feeling of being at some node of quietness, like the fabled eye at the centre of a hurricane.

Half an hour went by, then an hour. There was a flare of light beside me as the sergeant struck a match. I said quietly "Not asleep then Ted?"

"No. Want a cigarette?"

I slid back inside the turret and lit up. I said "This is a funny setup, no mistake."

"Is the kiddy asleep?"

I called back quietly. "Jane?" There was silence. I said "I think so. Why?"

He said "This lot stinks, it bloody do. Them wasps are cruel damn things, I never seen their like."

I said "Well, we could be worse off right at the minute."

He snorted. "And we could be a Hell of a sight better. Sittin here in a bloody gert tin box waitin' to be picked off. Get farther on foot. These things attract the wasps. Hang round 'em like flies round jam they do. They'll be back down I tell ee. And when they do the beggars'll have us."

I had to grin to myself. There spoke the footslogger ; things hadn't changed in the year or two since I'd been in the mob. I said "I don't see why we can't keep going indefinitely."

He said "The old story . . . armour's all right till you

has to get out of it. Which sooner or later you has to do. They devils know what they're doin'. They're fighting armour to armour right now, but they don't have to get out o' theirs. They can afford to wait." He flicked ash irritably from his cigarette. "How fast do the things breed, can ee tell us that?"

I said "I don't know anything about them, never studied wasps all that closely. If they are wasps . . . All I know is they're a bit like bees but not so highly organised."

He said "They're organised enough, they know what they're doing."

He seemed to have a fixation about intelligence. I said "I don't altogether see that, Ted. They're vicious, and God knows they're dangerous, but I don't think they're doing anything more than forage. They'll need a Hell of a lot of food to keep their nests going, they must be colossal."

He said "What about his camp then, didn't they work that out?"

I was quiet for a moment. Then I said "It didn't look like an accident I'll admit. But it could have been."

He said bitterly "Then there were twenty accidents just alike. I tell ee this area were thick with Army stuff, they were trucking civvies out by the score. Where's all the blokes now, I want to know. Wiped up, I reckons. Same as his lot."

"We got one nest, the armour went in and burned it up. Only they things were too smart to have it happen twice. They laid for us, made a clean sweep."

I didn't want to be convinced but he was managing it.

He said "They had scouts out, too high up to touch 'em with anything. We banged away for a bit but it were a waste o' rounds ; unless you hits the bloody things square a rifle bullet just bounces off. They was watching us all day, working out the disposition o' the troops, where the various units was lyin' like. And us fools lettin' 'em get on with it. Then after dark, wham. The orders go out. 'All right blokes, go down and get 'em. All units press home attacks.'" He laughed. "Christ, listen to me. The wasp High Command. Silly, isn't it? Makes me wonder if——"

He broke off. There was a booming. And a rattling, a clattering. Like no other noise I'd ever heard, except the noise of an earthquake. It seemed to be coming toward us, whipping across the Plain. We waited, gripping the coamings. Impossible not to believe some huge thing was charging us in the moonlight. We started round but there was nothing to see, just the silver grass and the trees. The noise reached a peak and there was a jar as the shockwave passed under the wheels. The sound began to die away; down below, Jane screamed.

I started to swing out of the turret. I said "It's all right, darling, it's over. It won't hurt." There was silence.

"Jane?"

The sergeant said slowly "She's asleep. Cried out in her sleep. Let her bide."

I sat back. I said "There was a fight in Brockledean. I think some of your folks got through to the village before the wasps went for them. I'm still trying to get over it." I told him what I'd seen. He was quiet till I'd finished then he let out one of those long, slow whistles of his. He said softly "Christ, that must have bin a do."

I changed the subject. "How did you manage to get away, after the 'quake?"

"Well, I were over in Yatley when it started, in a pub. It didn't do a sight o' damage, not at first, but the civvies started to panic. There were half a dozen boys in the other bar, I went through an' put me head in. 'Come on lads' I says to 'em, 'Better shift a leg, we're goin' to be needed.' Then They come. Christ." I sensed him shudder at the memory. He said "The winders bust in, see? There were a gert crash. I thought t'was the 'quake again but it were them things. The wasps. Two of 'em come straight through the glass, frames an' all. One lands on the mat, t'other up on the bar counter. An' there they were, sittin' lookin' at us, and their faces like puppy-dogs, twistin' about to see. Then the lights went out. Christ . . ."

"How did you get out?"

"Danged if I can remember, not rightly. It were a bit of a scuttle. But we landed up outside. There were fires

burnin' already, and torches flashing about an' people running. And them darin' things comin' down on their backs There was an M.P. with a jeep. We piled on, as many of us as could. A mile out on the road one o' the things come down at us, straight in the screen. We turned over in the ditch and the next thing I remembers is wakin' up, and there were the boys. They done a good job on 'em, half took their bloody heads off . . . Reckon they'd have got me an' all only they thought I were dead like. Well, I laid under a bush till I felt a bit smarter, then I started walkin'. I was wonderin' how long it'd be afore they got me. Walked most o' the day, here and there. Then I saw your place. Reckoned I'd do a quiet reccy. I needed water bad, an' a bit to eat. Next thing I knows I'm on me back and the rifle's away out o' me hands and the dog's standin' there on top o' me sort of darin' me to move. Not that I would've . . . You knows the rest."

I said "If only we could get to the nests. Go for 'em, burn 'em up before they breed any more. We could knock them out, smash them." I banged the handle of one of the smoke discharges. "Even with these. We could lay a screen, they'd never see us in that."

He wagged his thumb in the direction of the Saladin. "They tried that this morning. His gunner told me, reckoned after the camp got beat up Connor nearly done his tank. They lobbed all the stuff they'd got on 'em all round by Yatley. Said they didn't do a sight o' good. Things are down deep, he said, wi' little burrows where they comes through. Nothin' to see. Reckoned when they opened up the wasps come up like confetti, smothered 'em. Took 'em a couple of hours to fight back out. Since then they bin on the run. We're all on the run. God knows when we'll stop."

I said quickly "I think Neil knows what he's doing."

He nodded. "He's a cool bastard, that. Like ruddy ice. Knows just what he wants, he do. Had time to think now, work it all out. There's a type o' bloke like that, I come across 'em before. He don't care about you or me, or hisself. Mebbe not even the kiddy. He wants the Army to win, just for the book. He don't care how. You were damn lucky, I tell ee that. He's got it all weighed out, he's fightin'

a guerrilla war already same as we shall all be doin' afore long if we don't look smart. Did he tell you he used that Browning on some civvies this morning?"

I said "Good God, surely not. Shot at them?"

He laughed. "Not *at* 'em. Close over their heads. Damn close."

"How do you know, Ted?"

"'Cause I seen 'em. That were up by Yatley, first thing. I were still a bit dazed like, walkin' along the side o' the road. I seed this gang o' blokes, about twenty of 'em. I didn't go much on their looks. They were wild, what wi' the 'quakes and everything. I got out o' the way a bit, see, then down the road he come. I reckon he was tourin' about lookin' for them damn nests. The civvies gets in his way an' he shouts at 'em to move over, let him through. Well, they starts hollerin' an' I were just goin' to stand up an' flag him, then one of 'em waves a rifle at en. Service rifle, God knows where he got that. But that were it. He let fly."

He paused reflectively. "The civvies went in all directions. Made for the ditches mainly, or just went down flat on their faces. I moved a bit smartish meself. Had to, in a manner o' speakin'. By the time I'd got straightened out again he were past and away, then the wasps come down. The civvies got off one shot, that were all. I hung about. I couldn't move out o' cover and anyways I wanted to get hold o' that rifle. I seen what they done. All on it. Christ, the bastards . . . I reckon that must have bin a huntin' party . . ."

I shivered. "Did you tell Connor you knew about that?"

"No I didn't. What the eye don't see . . ." He left the rest unsaid.

I said "He's got the nerve all right, there'll be trouble over that."

The sergeant said shortly "Not off them civvies there won't. And not from the flippin' Army. The way things are goin' he won't have to worry none."

"What do you mean, Ted?"

"Do ee know a sight about earthquakes?"

"Not much. Why?"

"I was wonderin' how far this muck-up stretches. Could it cover the whole country? Could there be a 'quake as big as that?"

I said "It isn't impossible. There was a monstrous shake-up in Assam fifty or sixty years ago, the devastated area was twice the size of Britain. But that was exceptionally bad. Stones flew in the air, it was that violent. And Assam was in an earthquake belt. Britain isn't."

He said "Britain didn't use to be. And stones flew last night. Straight up in the air, I seen 'em."

"Surely not . . ."

He said "I wish I were jokin' . . ."

I was quiet for a minute. Just how bad were things anyway? I had no means of telling. I'd been concentrating on getting out of the disturbed area into a comparatively safe region. What if there was no refuge? But that was a ridiculous thought. There's always somewhere to run, it just depends on finding it and moving fast enough when you're getting there. No place to run? Then we'd be living a nightmare. The sort of nightmare from which you can't wake up . . ."

The sergeant said "I reckon ye'd better get some rest. No point both on us sittin' it out. I'll take over for a spell."

I yawned. "Thanks, I suppose I could try." I felt dozey and heavy-eyed but I was sure sleep was a long way off. I settled down into the turret. Surprisingly, I managed to doze. I woke at first light to a distant throbbing. I sat up thinking of earthquakes again, but it was the Furies. Scores of them, very high and moving fast. I could see them through the tree cover above us, greyish dots against the pallor of the sky. Ted was sitting rigid watching them, one hand on the trap ready to shut down if they dived. But the squadrons pushed on, either not noticing the armour or ignoring it. They passed steadily out of sight to the West.

We got under way soon after six. Before we moved off Neil came over and showed me the route he intended to take. We were to move in a wide sweep, heading West at

first and then swinging round to the South. That way we might avoid the worst of the broken ground ahead. Eight or ten miles on, our route should cross the M.15 where it arrowed over the Plain running roughly parallel to the old A.30. If the motorway was usable we'd turn West on it and carry on to Summerton. From there we were to head South-west again into Dorset, with Swyreford distant about forty miles. I nodded over the map; it seemed straightforward enough. I said "Can I ask a question?"

"If you like. Make it snappy."

I said "What happens if your base has been beaten up? Could be we'll find it like Brockledean and Yatley. What do you aim to do then?"

He narrowed his eyes for a moment. "Working on the premise that the rest of the country is as badly hit as the South, I should make for the coast. I think most of the stuff in this area will do the same. The sea would certainly be the best bet, we could regroup down there and there'd be a chance of liaising with the Navy. They can't have been hit too hard as yet. I've got a theory about these damned insects; only an idea so far but I don't think you'll find I'm far wrong. They haven't got much of a flight duration. A few miles at the outside. Couldn't expect much else from the size of them anyway; I suppose later on the boffins will manage to prove they were aerodynamic impossibilities, like bumblebees. Now if the worst happens I say we can expect the Top Brass to work from islands or floating bases beyond the range of the enemy. I shouldn't think they'd mount much of an attack outside the three-mile limit."

I stood for a moment trying to take in the implication of what he'd said. He went on briskly "That's taking the pessimistic view of course and I'm certainly looking too far ahead. Impossible to do much long-range planning at the moment. I don't care for this radio silence and we haven't seen a single plane for twenty-four hours but I don't think we can draw any sweeping conclusions from what hasn't happened. Could be our people are all tied up in some other sector, the brutes seem to have made a pretty clean sweep of this one. Anyway, as far as the present jaunt is concerned, if and when we're attacked

keep yourselves shut down. Stay close but not too close. Make sure you give the flamethrowers a clear arc of fire ; that means somewhere about thirty yards at least. And wait for orders. Apart from that it'll be up to you to keep your noses clean. You'll have to do some rather pretty driving ; from here on the ground's like the arse end of the moon. If you do get into trouble you can't get out of I shall probably push on to base on my own. Lost enough time as it is. OK?"

Ted had a couple of queries for him. It was decided the sergeant would come with us as far as Swyreford and try to contact his own people at Colton Forum. After Neil had hurried back to the Saladin I leaned on the front of the APC and smoked a cigarette. It was going to be another fine day ; somewhere a lark was spiralling up and there was a clean, fresh, early-morning smell to the air. Ted saw to the stowing of the kit then he hauled one of the flamethrowers out of the back of the truck, strapped the pressure-pack on his back and climbed up to the turret. I followed him aboard, settled myself into the driving seat. Two engines revved, breaking the quiet. We edged out after the platoon leader, keeping about fifty yards in the rear. In about a mile we reached the first of the crevasses ; Neil swung ninety degrees right and began to forge West alongside it.

Our course brought the sun astern. Ahead the sky lost its steely colour. A faint blue wash spread up it, deepening toward the zenith. We travelled for half an hour and the downs round Summerton ceased to be vague grey outlines and took on form and depth. I picked out the high point of Brad Beacon, a smooth swell of land, its outline unbroken either by hedges or trees. I'd climbed it once, soon after I moved to Brockledean, counted twelve of the eighteen spires you were supposed to be able to make out from the top, seen the hills of Somerset way off on the horizon floating like a cloud. All that seemed a long time ago now.

The barrier still stretched away to our left and now the downs were almost due South of us. It was obvious we were going to have to find a way through the mess, we were fast overshooting our objective. Neil evidently had

the same thought ; he stood up in the turret and signalled me to turn onto the rough. I swung left, following him, and saw the Saladin start to lurch as it reached the broken ground.

CHAPTER FIVE

We were in trouble right from the start. The crevasses opening on all sides made the land look like nothing more than a gigantic crazy paving. Ahead the ground was even rougher ; in places compression forces had levered up slabs that looked like dusty ice-floes, their edges a yard or more thick. Driving was a nerve-racking business. Some of the cracks were rubble-filled to within a foot or so of the surface ; we crossed the narrowest of them, skirting the wider ones. We daren't risk the great weight of the cars on insecure footings. The crevasses were awe-inspiring ; some of them were fifteen or twenty feet wide and there was no telling their depth. We ran alongside one of the biggest of them for some distance. I could see down the raw earth sides for twenty feet or more and there was no sign of narrowing. Ted had a better view from the turret ; he remarked tersely over the intercom that 'the bloody thing seemed to go down for miles.'

Time after time the cars ran onto peninsulas of firm ground that proved to be bounded by the fissures, and there was nothing to do but turn back or reverse. In two hours driving I don't think we could have got more than a mile Southwards. As the sun got higher the temperature in the APC began to rise. At speed the open traps would have given a certain amount of ventilation but at our pace there was little or none. Jane complained once about the heat. She wanted to open the rear doors but I wouldn't have it. I'd seen the speed with which the Furies dived, it just wasn't worth the risk.

By nine a.m. I was beginning to get worried about my petrol. I was on the point of asking Ted to report the fuel situation when the Saladin found a lead of firm ground. Neil accelerated and I followed, keeping about ten or twelve lengths astern. A couple of miles of clear running,

a bit more weaving and backing and we were through. Ted expressed his relief gustily. "Best bloody tank trap I ever seen . . ." Then after a pause, "I still reckon we'd have come through quicker on foot . . ."

The Furies attacked when we were within a few hundred yards of the motorway. I saw Neil wave and point back behind us, there was an exclamation from the intercom and a burst of swearing. Simultaneously the sky became full of insects, glinting like guineas in the sunlight. This time there was no doubt we were the objective. The Saladin stopped abruptly and I turned in a half circle, swinging back to face it some thirty or forty yards away. I shut the trap and clamped it. I said "Better close down, Ted." He swore again. "The Hell wi' that . . ." There was a whickering, a cloud of smoke rolled across the field of the periscopes. I didn't see the effects of the shot but within a few seconds the flamethrower hissed again and that time I saw the tip of the burning fuel as it licked at a diving Fury. The insect turned over and fell out of sight.

The periscopes gave me an unreal, panoramic view of the fighting round the Saladin. The car was broadside to me, square in the centre glass. Round it the Furies circled in a cloud, jinking and feinting, keeping just out of range of the flamethrowers. From time to time half a dozen insects would swing out of the cloud, mass a hundred yards or so away then dive back through the cordon in formation. Their aim seemed to be to carry through the barrage of flame by sheer weight. The tactic was unsuccessful; one or other of the guns would catch the wasps, the heavy bodies would drop, cannon into the armour and roll down to lie twitching beside the wheels. A drift of scorched insects began to gather round the Saladin; it was a bizarre business.

The primary attack lasted some quarter of an hour. At the end of that time the grass was burning in a dozen places and a veil of smoke was making the oncoming Furies harder to see. They changed their methods; one moment they were roaring round as thickly as ever, the next they'd gone, soaring away into the haze. I thought they'd given up; then something glittered beside the wheels of the Saladin and I saw the grass was alive with injured

wasps, crawling and humping toward Neil's car. I saw one of them get a grip on the rear tyre and swing itself up over the tread, then the vision through the 'scopes was cut off. There was a distorted glimpse of a dark body, a huge clawed foot. We were being boarded as well.

I had a bad moment. I yelled at Ted, there was a clatter on the plating over my head and the clang of the top hatch being shut. He came down in a heap, encumbered by the flamethrower. Rasping and scraping sounded from a dozen points on the armour as Furies hauled themselves aboard. Sek started to bark deafeningly and I shouted at her to be quiet. The thing that had been blocking my periscopes moved clear; the view was almost immediately obscured by another Fury crawling up from the ground. Ted was saying something about 'coming scuttling like bloody rats.' The insects had achieved their primary object; they'd got to close quarters, and there wasn't a thing we could do about it.

I called back to Jane. "You all right, love?"

"Ye-es." She sounded uncertain.

"Don't be scared. They can't get in."

She said "It isn't that. I'm cooking . . ."

There was nothing we could do about the heat. The ventilation hadn't been designed to cope with this sort of emergency. The sun was high now, beating on the armour. My face began to run with sweat; I moped my forehead and listened to Ted cursing. "Stuck here in a bloody tin oven bakin' ourselves . . . Armour never were no bloody answer, never will be. Blanking armour . . ." He was trying to get at the radios, still in trouble with the junk he'd got on his back. I asked him to tell Neil about our petrol. The reply was blistering.

Driving was out of the question now, we were harbouring so many Furies I could only get odd glimpses of the outside world and those usually through the side 'scopes. We settled down grimly to a siege.

It seemed odd to me that they hadn't used their infiltration technique earlier. The frontal attacks had cost them dear. After what I'd seen it was hard not to credit them with a high degree of intelligence; it occurred to me they might still be learning about us. I tried to imagine how

their minds were working but it was impossible of course. I knew very little about insects but I remembered from scraps of reading that their nervous system was very different from ours. There was a brain of sorts but it was a very minor affair, most of the actions were governed by motor centres and ganglia scattered about the body. The volume of nerve fibre in those huge things probably equalled that of a human brain; did that mean they were potentially as smart as us? I tried to remember what I'd picked up about that sort of thing. Was there a direct relationship between brain-weight and intelligence? I seemed to recall something like that. I knew the brain of a dolphin was larger than that of a man. And people had been trying to teach dolphins to talk . . .

I thought back on what Neil had said. He'd envisaged an alarming situation where a few thousand oversized insects had kicked us right off the mainland. It seemed absurd until I remembered Brockledean and Yatley. Things like that could have been happening all over the country. We had no means of knowing, the brutes seemed to have cut all communications pretty effectively.

That brought me back to the idea of intelligence. After all, they'd even turned the earthquakes to advantage. Perhaps they'd known they were going to happen; maybe as well as intelligence they had a whole range of instincts we knew nothing about. The sort of prescience that makes storm-flies dance before rain . . . My ideas got wilder. I wondered whether the gigantism had spread from a few individuals or if it was a sort of galloping mutation that was affecting wasps everywhere. It seemed crazy but if it were true there didn't look to be much hope for us. There were wasps of one sort or another in nearly every country of the world.

The stalemate lasted two hours; then, unbelievably, they left. I was lying back in the seat with my eyes shut trying not to think about the temperature inside the car when there was a slithering overhead and a bump, and light shone suddenly through the periscopes. I sat up hastily and was in time to see the Furies leave the Saladin. One minute they were clustering so thickly over the car they obscured its outlines, made it look like some bright

unholy cake set there on the Plain, the next they were off and away, zooming over the grass in all directions as they gained height. I shouted with relief. "They're going . . .!" Ted started to winch the turret round, following them through the command periscopes. He reported them bunching together at a couple of hundred feet and moving off, again to the West. He lost sight of them within minutes.

We resisted the temptation to open up. We re-established contact with the platoon leader and Neil got us to drive round him slowly so that we could check each other. Both cars were clean. I unclamped the hatch, climbed out and ran round to the back doors of the Saracen. I opened them and Jane practically fell out on top of me. She was pale, and her dress top was wet through. I said anxiously "You all right love?"

She put her face in her hands. "Gosh . . . There's a little man in my head beating out tunes with a hammer. Oh, those horrible things. Still . . ." She looked up and smiled wanly. "We beat them, didn't we?"

I said "Yes love, we beat them. No trouble at all." I reached inside the carrier and patted Sek. She was panting like a steam engine. The interior of the APC was as hot as an oven.

The Saladin came up alongside. Neil shouted from the turret "You OK down there?"

"Just about, thanks."

"Right, back aboard then. Can't stooge around here, isn't healthy."

Jane shuddered. "No, please, not for a minute . . ." I hoisted her up and pushed her inside. "Sorry Jane, we've got to get going. You'll be all right when we're moving. There'll be a draught then, you'll see."

The motorway seemed to have escaped major damage. We turned onto it and built up to top speed. As we came over the crest of the down below Brad Beacon I saw smoke ahead; a few minutes later the cars roared into Summerton.

The place was pretty much a shambles. Half a dozen buildings on either side of the main street were burning fiercely; a fire engine stood at the kerb and there were hosepipes spread across the road but nobody was making

any attempt to fight the flames. We drove past cautiously keeping to the middle of the street. A few hundred yards farther on I had a glimpse of a group of people clustered on the path. They seemed to be looting a shop. They ran when they spotted the cars ; I wondered why, whether it was because of what they'd been doing or because we were armoured and liable to attract the Furies. I saw that tanks of some sort had been through the town ; their tracks had bitten deeply into the road surfacing.

There was an iron lattice bridge where a railway had crossed the street. It was skewed out of line but it was still supported on the ends-of the main girders. We edged underneath slowly ; beyond, the road widened and there was an ugly little town hall, all pillars and curlicues. Just before it on the left was a filling station. Neil drew in under the canopy and stopped. I pulled up close behind him. I wouldn't have gone much farther, the tank gauge was reading zero. I switched off and got out of the car.

There was silence except for the rumbling of the flames. The smoke rolled close overhead, veining the sky with black, trailing ginger shadows along the ground and across the fronts of the buildings. I looked up at the town hall. Strings of bunting were hanging listlessly and there was a banner announcing a fête. The tower clock was still keeping time ; I wondered how long it would be before it stopped.

We were evidently not the first visitors to the garage. The covers of the pumps had been forced and two of them still had their emergency handles fitted. I hoped the storage tanks hadn't been drained. Neil and the gunner took up positions on each side of the cars while I swung a gantry out across the path and put the filler nozzle into the Saracen's tank. Ted worked the handle and there was a reassuring gurgle of petrol. The mechanism creaked steadily. I watched the dial pointer edging round ; the sun felt hot on the back of my neck.

There was a noise of wings. I spun round. Three Furies were heading toward the Saracen in a tight vic, moving fast under the rolling cloud of smoke. They looked absurdly big and somehow Oriental against the background of old stone.

I couldn't let go of the petrol filler, it was as if the thing was stuck to my hand. I tried to crouch against the armour and all the time I was holding the pistol grip and the liquid was sloshing down into the tank. Neil ran forward lifting the tube of the flame thrower ; he was shouting something to the gunner. The Furies changed direction, swooping down at him. For a moment I thought he'd left it too late then there was the familiar whickering, a startling ball of white flame edged with orange where the brightness of the napalm turned to ordinary fire. The wasps landed in the road ; two lay twitching, the third was up in a moment and scuttling at him like some great lame dog. Neil jumped to one side ; the gunner had moved up in support and the wasp ran straight into the flame from the second weapon. Neil turned back to us with sweat on his face. He said "Carry on there." It was only then I realized the sergeant had never stopped working the handle.

Everything happened at once. The petrol reached the top of the tank and streamed back onto the road, I called out and simultaneously Jane opened the back doors of the APC. She said "Bill, what is it, is everything all right?"

I heard Neil shout "Get that bloody child inside . . ." I couldn't move. I was staring open mouthed at the thing behind Ted.

I wanted to shout but nothing would come. I put my hand up in front of me, stupidly, like somebody trying to ward off an evil spirit. Ted had taken a step forward ; he saw my face and stopped. He half turned but he was nowhere quick enough. The Fury launched itself from the opal globe atop the pump, landed on his shoulders. The impact knocked him to his knees.

Whether the insect had been there all along or whether some noise we made fetched it from a hiding place, I never knew. There seemed no appreciable time lag between my catching sight of the black and yellow mask peering down and Ted grovelling at my feet with the thing clipping away at his neck. I saw his head loll forward ; his hands pattered on the path. Blood moved away in a swift vee from each side of his head.

Sek came out of the carrier in a bound ; Jane had the loop of the lead round her wrist, she measured her length

on the road and I fell over her. I clawed for one of the rifles, knowing it was too late already. I turned back and something rolled past my feet. The head of the Fury, jaws clicking. Sek was worrying at the body that still clung to the sergeant, flensing its sting in his back. Jane was screaming and trying to pull the dog clear.

I swung the gun butt and at the third or fourth blow the remains lost their grip and rolled across the forecourt. I followed up, panting. I couldn't stop beating with the rifle. I saw bright body segments splitting, pale flesh welling up. A leg bounced across the path; something splashed my face. I wasn't conscious of putting any effort into the blows; I wanted to smash and smash until there was nothing left of the thing, not one tiny scrap. I can remember Jane getting hold of my arm; that was crazy, she could have been brained. She'd still got Sek, somehow; the dog was plunging and baying. I saw Neil pointing, behind him the gunner running like Hell for the Saladin. The redness faded, and the street was full of diving wasps.

My first instinct was to huddle back behind the pumps but that was no good, that was what the brutes wanted. I ran toward the APC, towing Jane. Somewhere on the way I dropped the rifle. I saw Ted's body, blood glittering along the gutter. The images were meaningless, just so many half-glimpsed snapshots. The back of the car was open; we got in somehow and I slammed the doors. A second later the first of the wasps hit the armour full bore. The crash rocked the Saracen. I was threshing about in the half dark trying to get past Jane to the turret. All I could think of were the two open flaps, one over the commander's position, one above the driving seat.

I got the first one closed, swung my legs down through the turret mechanism and tried to slide forward. I jammed. Sek was howling; there was another huge blow on the plating. I could see through the flap in front of me. The Saladin was fifty yards away already, moving fast and barraging flame.

I arced my body and thrust as hard as I could. Something gave; there was pain, then I was in the driving seat and the hatch was closed and dogged. I heard the roar as one of the attackers changed course and zoomed up over

the turret. Through the 'scopes I saw the Saladin swing right and vanish. I rammed the starter and took the car away at full throttle. I'd got enough sense left to realize that somehow we had to close up with the platoon leader. Without flame we were helpless, if the Furies got to close quarters again they'd bog us down for hours. I steered right where Neil had turned, saw a wide, clear road and opened up. Five minutes later we were clear of Summer-ton and the other car was just visible ahead, a swaying dark-green speck.

We were off the motorway now and the road surface was nowhere near as good. The macadam was cracked and corrugated. I held the APC at top speed. The din inside was terrific ; from the back came noises that suggested the contents of half a dozen kitchens had come loose and were banging around. I could only hope Jane had had the sense to get down on the floor where she wouldn't be hurt.

The Saladin was closer ; I reckoned I'd closed the gap by half. I rammed my foot on the deck but the car wouldn't take any more throttle, she was flat out already. It went through my mind fleetingly that maybe in the morning the Furies had been confused into thinking the cars were dead. They knew better now ; if we let them close again they might camp for a week. Neil had obviously had the same idea ; he was trying to outpace the things, tire them and lose contact that way. It was impossible of course, they were five or six times as fast as the armour. They were circling the Saladin as it moved, keeping well out where the flame couldn't touch them. I guessed we were the centre of a similar cloud. Our speed was stopping them from landing but that was all.

I was within six lengths of the Saladin when the way was barred by a crevasse. I saw the leader start to swing and hit my own anchors as hard as I could. The next few moments were bad ; ten or twelve tons of APC take a lot of stopping. I saw the danger looming up and yanked the steering. I thought we weren't going to make it ; the car heeled her offside wheels in the air, there was the mother and father of all crashes as she came back level then I was bounding across the rough, trying to spot hazards through the restricted vision of the periscopes.

For us, the retreat ended just before three. I suppose it had to happen, it was only a question of time. The Saladin had been drawing away again and I was putting everything into closing the gap when my nearside wheels went into a crevasse. I swung off as hard as I could, gunning the engine to force the tyres to grip, claw the car back to firm ground. She made it with a leap ; I straightened up and saw the second hazard dead ahead. I stamped on the brake but there wasn't a chance. I felt the front of the car drop away, saw the periscope glasses coming at my face. I got my hands up and there was a thud and a burst of light, as sudden and final as the breaking of a cinema film. Then a sensation of falling, a ghastly feeling of sickness . . . and nothing, for quite a long time.

I came round slowly and by stages. The first thing I can remember is a sensation of being scraped with a hot, rough towel. I lay still wishing whoever was doing it would go away. It didn't stop and after a moment I sat up slightly and opened my eyes. The movement started a trip-hammer going inside my head. I groaned and the hot towel treatment started over. I put my hands up and touched fur, realized greyly that Sek had worked her way through the turret to me. She was licking my face. I mumbled "All right girl . . ." I opened my eyes again and tried to orient myself. I was in near-darkness and there was a pungent, heavy smell that I couldn't place. I touched the steering wheel in front of me, the sloping coaming over my head. The periscopes. How I'd missed splitting my skull on them I couldn't imagine.

My hand was hurting ; I seemed to have cut it somehow. I remembered racing the Furies, the Saladin jiggling in the scopes, the crazy drive through the crevasses. I sat bolt upright and yelled. "Jane?"

Silence.

"Jane!"

There was no answer and I moved convulsively, trying to work my way back out of the seat. A few megatons of explosive went off inside my skull and I slid back down and stayed still awhile. When I felt a little better I tried again, more carefully this time. It wasn't easy. The Saracen was tilted at an angle of nearly forty-five degrees, and

tipped to one side. I got my body through the turret ring and stuck for a while. My feet scrabbled among a collection of loose objects; a water bottle, some tins of food, a part of one of the flamethrowers. Instantly it seemed the noise of metal on metal was amplified inside the car. Scrapings and rustlings ran round the turret like eerie echoes. The sound was indescribable, a compound of slitherings, bumpings, rappings and drumming that made my back crawl. My thinking processes were working better now; I realized we must be covered with Furies. That sharp, cloying stink was the smell of the insects themselves.

For the first time I became conscious of the heat. Even the slight exertion had left me running with sweat. I let the noise die down then I called again, softly. The silence reproached me. I forced myself the rest of the way into the turret. Sek hindered me, bunting with her great head. I shoved her off, groped round till I found a torch. Some light was coming through the command periscopes but the body of the car was black; I shone the torch, saw a hand, a tangle of hair. I got to Jane and turned her over. She had a bruise on her forehead and her nose had bled, spattering the front of her dress. It was hard to see with just the torch but she didn't seem to be hurt anywhere else. She was limp and heavy; I held her awhile, not knowing what the Hell to do. Then I laid her down again as gently as I could and hunted round till I found one of the water bottles. I soaked a handkerchief and bathed her face and throat. It seemed an age before she moved. She put a hand up to her face and moaned, then she tried to sit up. She muttered something that sounded like 'black rabbit . . .'

I said "It's all right, we're all right now, don't worry . . ." She looked up at me, screwing her eyes as if she was trying to focus. Abruptly, she panicked. I held her wrists. I said "It's all right . . ." She relaxed again and I think she realized where we were. She said "Bill . . ." Then, foggily, "We fell over . . ."

She sat up again. I helped her. I said "Are you hurt anywhere? Tell me . . ."

She said vaguely "I don't think so, only my head . . . ow . . . where's Neil?"

"I don't know, I hadn't even thought. I got knocked out as well."

She said "Got to let him know we're all right. Think we're dead . . . Bill, it's so hot . . ."

I said "We can't go out, love ; there's wasps."

She looked up. The scraping and rattling had started again. I was wondering if the brutes could hear our voices. She said "Oh, no . . ."

I said "Come on, sit still for a bit. You had an awful bang . . . what happened, can you remember?"

"I . . . no, I can't . . . I can remember driving along and everything was bouncing about . . . oh, the wall. It just reached out and punched me."

I felt a bit relieved. She must be concussed but if she could remember that much maybe she wasn't too badly hurt. I said "Sit still anyway, rest for a time . . ."

"I'm all right."

"You're not. You were rambling about rabbits a minute or two ago."

She said indignantly "I couldn't have been . . . Bill, what are you doing?"

"It's all right. I'm going to try and see out."

The periscopes weren't a great deal of use. The angle of the turret was acute, all I could see was an expanse of brownish grass. I started to pull the turret round. As soon as the armour began to move the noise outside redoubled ; I heard picking and scratching just over my head. I felt a sort of thick rage but there was nothing I could do.

I saw the horizon, tilted and unreal. Then an expanse of blue sky, burning with sunlight. Then grass again. For all I knew Neil might have been standing by. I certainly couldn't see him if he was.

I turned to the radio gear. I put the headphones over my ears and switched on. There was nothing, not even the singing of a carrier wave. I spent ten minutes clicking controls before I gave up. The set was probably broken ; if it was, there was nothing I could do about it. Radio had never been my strong point.

I doubted in any case if the leader would have bothered to wait. It would hardly have been logical ; even if he'd known we were alive there wouldn't have been a thing he

could do. If he'd succeeded in driving the wasps off without roasting the pair of us he wouldn't have been able to take us with him.

Much better to push on to base. Maybe he'd try to send somebody back to us ; or maybe he'd just wash his hands of a nasty little moral problem and forget all about us. I swung the turret again, not wanting to face the fact that we were alone. I learned nothing fresh.

Jane was peering through at me, supporting herself with one hand against the side of the car. She said anxiously "Can you see anything?"

I wiped my face. It seemed I could feel the heat as a physical pressure, squeezing my brain. The pain throbbed slowly, making it hard to think. I said "I don't think he's there but we can't be sure." I was trying to remember the loading drill for a Browning. "Jane, I'm going to fire the gun up here. If he's anywhere about he'll hear it and know we're all right at least. Better put your fingers in your ears when I tell you, it'll make a devil of a row."

'A devil of a row' summed it up nicely ; I thought my already aching head was going to split. I emptied a magazine before I gave up. I didn't think I was doing any good and I couldn't stand much of that racket. As an after-thought I fired the smoke discharges. The cartridges went off with deafening blasts ; it was like being inside a dustbin while somebody clouted the end with a sledgehammer. We sat with our ears ringing and waited for some noise from outside. Nothing happened. After a few minutes the tip of the smoke cloud came into sight through the 'scopes, thick and grey-white, curling lazily across the Plain. The wasps on the armour shifted agitatedly for a time then settled down again. It was obvious there was nobody near us. Jane said bitterly "It's no good, he's gone. Come in the back again Bill, you can't do anything else."

We sat in the half dark. Above us the clittering and scraping went on spasmodically. I shifted about, trying to find a position where I didn't have to lean on the armour. The sides of the car were baking hot. Sweat trickled steadily down my back ; my shirt was drenched.

Jane said tightly "He might have tried to find out about

us. I thought he would." Then, in a small voice, "Do you think he'll come back, Bill?"

"Yes, of course. Or he'll send somebody. We shall be all right."

I could see the paleness of her dress, her face turned toward me. She said "I'm getting sloppy and stupid again I'm afraid. I don't think he will come back. I don't think we shall see him any more, ever."

I reached across and touched her hand. The palm was wet. I said "Don't be a clot. Try and rest, and don't worry. We shall be OK."

The temperature inside the car rose steadily.

CHAPTER SIX

Any movement became an effort. The air I was breathing felt as if it was coming straight from a moderate oven ; I had no way of telling how high the temperature had actually risen, maybe it was just as well. The morning had been bad but this was far worse. I listened to the scraping and gouging where the wasps were still trying to cut their way in to us. I had a queer thought. Before, their very persistence had been terrifying. Now I didn't see it like that. There was something pitifully inadequate about them ; they were dumb machines, throwing themselves hopelessly at things they couldn't understand. I wondered again where in all the hells they were coming from, what they were after. They couldn't wipe us out, beat all our tanks and planes and guns. The human race had had a million years to find out how to wage total war against anything including itself, and it certainly hadn't wasted much of that time.

Or where they so dumb? Just how much did sheer persistence, and sheer numbers, count in the push-button age? I started thinking up all the weapons we could use against them. Guns, bombs, aircraft . . . armour had a limited use certainly, so did bombs, but we couldn't just fly about spattering our own country with H.E. That would be hacking off our noses to spite our faces ; I was pretty sure

that for every wasp killed we'd wipe out a hundred humans. England would be in turmoil now, whole city populations on the move scattered about among the nest sites. We couldn't bomb a mess like that . . .

I began to appreciate the sheer difficulty of hitting at a target like the wasps. For the last forty or fifty years our technology had been concentrating more and more on means of mass destruction; we had our A-bombs and H-bombs, but they were useless as tactical weapons. What could you use for instance against an army deployed in the field except the weapons you'd always used against armies? And the Furies were more diffuse than any target in history, their dispersion was effortless and three dimensional. Throwing nukes at them would make about as much sense as using hand grenades to sweep up confetti . . . Their burrows were down deep, the gunner had said. How deep was deep? Could be even if we decided to use low-yield air blasts they wouldn't be knocked out. And ground explosions would foul up the whole country for years . . . Abruptly, I stopped feeling sorry for the wasps. It seemed to me they had it pretty good; whichever way we played, we would be the losers.

An hour later I was feeling pretty sorry for myself. The heat was incredible, unbearable. I knew I should have to do something. I tried to think about driving out. I doubted it was possible; the Saracen was tipped over so far it was obvious her back wheels were in the air and it was equally likely the front pair were hanging over a void. She must have buried her nose in the earth on the far side of the crevasse; that left her supported by her middle wheels only. When I started up they'd churn the soil under them and one of two things would happen. Either she'd dig down until she got some sort of a grip with her tail, in which case she stood a chance of clawing back out, or she'd go right in. That would be the end . . .

I sat up carefully, trying not to move faster than was absolutely necessary. Jane stirred uneasily. She said "Bill, what are you doing?"

I said "Stop where you are, love. Don't move more than you have to. I'm going to try and drive out."

She sat up as well. She said sharply "Can you?"

"I don't know. Maybe. I think it's worth trying."

She said "Be careful, Bill, if we slip . . ."

"It'll be all right, I'll go slowly. You stay there." I wrestled my way back through the turret and into the driving seat.

I was afraid the engine wouldn't start but it ran, although it sounded ragged. I selected reverse and revved cautiously. Nothing happened. I throttled harder and the car started to wallow. She levelled slightly then there was a heavy grinding, a crack, a sensation of slipping. I grabbed the wheel, squeezed. The nose tilted down. She was going, going . . . She slid a yard, checked, another foot . . . and stopped.

I let go of the steering. I found I was gasping for breath ; another inch, the slightest movement, and she would be down that hole. I could feel it. I switched off and waited for the shaking to stop. I've always had an inborn fear of falling, that had been a bad few minutes. The car creaked ominously once or twice but it seemed she was still wedged. Unless I did anything to disturb her . . . That was a game I couldn't afford to play any more. I worked back into the turret feeling like a dishrag in need of wringing out. The Saracen had increased her angle of tilt by fifteen degrees or so, she was almost standing on her nose.

My memory of the next few hours is pretty vague. We lay in the back of the carrier feeling the heat pressing down like an unbearable weight. Jane undid her dress and lay flapping it ineffectually ; I don't think she was really conscious of what she was doing. Later she fell into a sort of half doze, turning about from time to time, moaning to herself, shifting her long legs awkwardly in the confined space. I dribbled water onto her face, letting it run down her throat. It didn't do any good but it was all I could think of. The wasps never left the armour.

Had they decided to conduct a war of nerves they could hardly have gone about it better. The scraping and tapping went on almost without a break. Apart from Sek's quick panting it was the only sound there was. I began to distinguish patterns in the noise, and identify them with possible actions. Those sharp raspings and clatterings were undoubtedly their claws as they ran about, and the heavier

thumps were the landing impacts of fresh insects come possibly to relieve the guard. The softer, almost inaudible drummings were the tips of their velvet-black antennae as they tapped them nervously on the steel. And the drawn-out, harsh scrapings must be their mandibles as they tried to gouge their way in to us. Gouge and kill, gouge and kill, on and on for ever. They were machines, programmed to destroy us. They would wait like machines. They would wait forever . . .

I started to get hallucinations. I dreamed I was sitting in the bar of the Carpenter's Arms, talking to Tod. I could see it all vividly ; the baskets of flowers in the porch just outside the open door, the long counter, the pumps . . . On the table in front of me was a pint of beer, cool, straight from the cellar. All I had to do was pick it up and drink, drink . . . I did pick it up, a score of times, but it turned into a canteen half-full of lukewarm, soupy water, and the pub vanished ; we were back in a machine, a crippled, dark thing that stank of the Furies and our own sweat.

Another time we were by a brook and the water was gliding deep and green and all we had to do was ease ourselves in and soak up all the coolness ; but when we tried Ted came floating up from a void, his neck open at the back and shedding bright blood all round. When that happened I damn nearly screamed . . .

I think if it hadn't been for Jane I'd have opened the doors sometime in that afternoon and walked out to the Furies. But somehow she swam through all the dreams and I never completely lost touch. I'd come round and find myself bathing her face or stroking her wet hair, mumbling some stupid thing or another. Once she started to cry, I held her again to make her stop. I asked her what was wrong, what I could do ; she shook her head helplessly while the hot tears squeezed out and ran across her face. "It isn't you, it isn't you, it's Ted . . ."

I don't remember noticing any sudden lessening of the misery ; all I remember is a time when I could breathe easier, when the heat was not abated but slightly less unbearable. My brains weren't stewing any more, I could start a thought and actually trace it through to its end. It was sometime then that I heard engines.

I waited, listening. The blood was still pounding in my ears and I couldn't be sure of anything. After a time I levered myself back toward the turret. I moved carefully; I'd got an idea the wasps were waiting for sounds from inside the armour. If we could stay quiet long enough they might convince themselves we were dead. I got to the periscope glasses, peered through. The land still shimmered with mirage but I thought I saw shapes moving. Tanks. I rubbed my face and stared again but they had passed out of my field of vision. Shortly after that the sounds faded away.

I heard them again an hour later and that time I was more certain. I saw them passing, clearer this time, huge things with long guns wearing heavy muzzle brakes. I heard firing, and some of the turrets seemed to be rotating. The things were surrounded by Furies, they looked like great prehistoric creatures tormented by flies. They were soon out of sight and I daren't touch the turret to bring them back into view. I regretted the smoke discharges I'd wasted but there was no way of reloading the tubes without opening up.

I went back to Jane. She was sitting up when I reached her; I said softly "Hello love, how do you feel?"

She put her head in her hands. "Awful, Bill, can't we——"

"Shhh . . ."

She said blearily "What?"

"Whisper. The wasps are still on top. I was hoping they'd think we were dead. If they hear us they'll know we're not."

She shuddered. She said pleadingly "Can't we get out?" Isn't there any way?"

I shook my head. I'd been thinking of how to get at the brutes but the answer was a flamethrower. We had a couple of the things in the car but I'd never handled one and it wasn't a good time to start experimenting. I thought there was a chance I could learn to operate one of them, they looked pretty simple, but I needed something surer than that. If I opened those doors I should have about a second to spare at the outside . . . I said "We'll just have

to wait, Jane. The worst's over now. They won't stay much longer, you see." I hoped I was right.

She said miserably "I want to spend a penny. I've wanted to for ages."

I said "Oh God . . . Look, if the worst comes to the worst you'll just have to spend it. It's better than being killed." I shook her shoulder gently. "You're a big girl now Jane. I shan't worry if you don't." She didn't answer, just sat trembling.

The Furies did leave, an hour latter. I'd never really expected it. There was a slithering and banging, a huge booming of wings. We looked at each other unbelievably then I scrambled up to the turret. I was in time to see the whole cloud of them smoking off across the Plain. I raised a cheer that was more of a croak. It was like a reprieve from death.

Jane was already on her feet, trying to edge up to the back doors. I got past her. I said "Wait a minute, we've got to be careful. Remember they like to leave one behind."

"I don't care . . . quick, please Bill . . ."

I said "Don't be daft." I inched the doors open, ready to slam them again if I heard a buzz of wings. Everything was quiet; cool air blew gloriously against my face. I opened wider. Nothing moved.

I sent Sek out. I didn't like it but there wasn't much choice; if there was a rearguard she stood a better chance of dealing with it than either of us. She gathered herself on the edge of the sloping deck, tensed and sprang with a clatter of claws. She circled out of sight, nose questing in the grass. I waited a minute; when there were no sounds I swung myself down to the ground. I walked round both sides of the carrier. There was no wasps. I went back to the tail and held my arms up for Jane.

We sprawled on the grass, just drinking in coolness. For a couple of minutes we would have been easy game for any of the huge wasps that happened to fly by, but fortunately none did. Then I sat up and lit a cigarette. I left Jane on her own while I walked round to the front of the carrier to see exactly what had happened.

It was more or less as I'd worked it out. She'd gone nose first into a wide crevasse; she was tipped down at an

extreme angle, her front buried in the earth a foot or so below the far lip, the stern and last great pair of wheels high in the air. Her middle wheels had dug into the earth at the edge of the fissure, sinking themselves to their hubs. They still rested on an insecure-looking foundation of rubble. I leaned on the armour and looked down into the pit. I stepped back hastily ; there was no bottom visible, the sides stretched away like cliffs till they met in a blackish gloom.

Jane came round to me. She'd caught her hair back with a mysterious piece of ribbon and tidied her dress. She was picking at the fabric disgustedly. It was wet, and smudged with dirt and blood. My own clothes weren't in a much better state. She said "I'd give pounds and pounds just to bathe and be able to change. Do you think we can make the car go again?"

"There isn't a chance. If I drive her any more she's going to tip on her nose, see, and go right down. And it's an awful long way to the bottom. It needs something to tow her. If she was pulled backwards she'd be all right but she can't do it on her own."

Jane looked down the fissure and drew back as I had done. She said determinedly "Well we shall have to walk, that's all. We'd better get away because if any more wasps see the car they'll come down and catch us."

There was a lot of sense in that ; the Plain round about was fairly flat, the disabled APC stuck up like a sore thumb. We collected what we thought we could carry ; a haversack, some tins of rations, a couple of bottles of water. I hesitated over taking a rifle and decided against it. From what I'd seen it would be virtually useless and it was all extra weight. I took one of the flamethrowers and a spare pack of fuel. Before we moved off I tried the weapon out ; as I'd thought, it was pretty simple. There was a pressure tap on the shoulder pack, and a trigger on the hand-grip. Pressing it opened a valve and struck a flint that lit the fuel as it came through. I fired a half-second burst across the Plain and we had to walk round stamping out smouldering grass. After that I felt better. The Furies respected the *flammenwerfer* more than anything else ; if we were attacked we might have a chance of holding them off

till we reached some sort of shelter. I checked the Saracen again for anything else that could conceivably be of use but there was nothing. I swung down outside, reached up and slammed the back doors. No point leaving the car open to the weather, somebody else might find her a handy refuge sometime. Jane lifted the haversack. She said quietly "Which way?"

I looked at the sun, then down to the South. In that direction lay a range of hills, blue with distance. Behind us was nothing but an empty horizon. A trace of smoke showed where Summerton was still burning. I walked off a few paces then turned back. The carrier looked oddly desolate, perched up there like a little foundered ship. She was covered with wasp droppings; there were grey-white streaks on the armour and wheels where the mess had run down her sides. She'd been my first command; she hadn't lasted very long. I shook my head. I said "I don't know which way, Jane. I don't know what's best to do."

She was at my elbow, waiting patiently. "What's the matter, Bill?"

I shrugged. "Somehow it all seems so bloody pointless. Poor old Ted getting killed, and now this. Trust Sampson to ball things up."

She said angrily "You mustn't think like that. Nobody could have done any better. At least we're still alive."

I put my arm round her shoulders, impulsively. She relaxed against me gently and it was all right. She stayed still for a few moments then she pushed away and giggled. She said "You look like a sort of twentieth century Quixote. You know, terribly serious and all strapped round with guns and things."

I laughed. I said "He didn't have much luck with the windmills. He should have stuck to napalm."

She twined her fingers in mine. She said "Let's go away, Bill. Come on." We started walking toward the hills.

I'd had some vague hope of picking up the Saladin's tracks but there wasn't a chance of that. The ground was hard, the grass short and dry. Once or twice I thought I saw faint tyre marks but I couldn't be certain. After a while I gave up looking, concentrated on moving as nearly south-west as I could. I let Sek run free. She kept pretty

close to us ; after the first few minutes she dropped behind and stayed almost at heel. She knew well enough things were far wrong.

The great crevasse that had wrecked the Saracen curved off to our right and we soon lost sight of it. The land ahead was undamaged. That was the final irony ; we'd been almost clear of danger, I'd literally fallen at the last ditch. We pushed on fast until a low swell of ground had hidden the car from us, then we slowed down. There was no point wearing ourselves out, God only knew how far we would have to walk.

The sun set among huge swathes and banners of gold. In the afterglow we came to a road. Nearby were tall clumps of bushes : we crawled into the thickest of them and rested long enough for me to smoke a cigarette. We discussed what was the best thing to do. I was hazy about exactly where we were ; I wondered if it would be better to keep on across country. Jane wanted to follow the road till we reached houses. We agreed to do that. Basically we both had the same idea ; to get ourselves as quickly as possible out of the affected area and back to some sort of sanity.

I don't think I'd ever realized before what a big place England is. Like the rest of us I'd got used to thinking of it as an overcrowded, house-ridden little country full of suburbs and traffic jams, with people standing on each other's heads for room. But now even that one little road seemed endless ; we walked for an hour without seeing a light or any sign of a human being. Our world was expanding of course, and we were shrinking in proportion ; I was very conscious of the two of us trudging along, the only living specks in all that wildness of grass and Downs. The silence became oppressive. The night was totally still, the only sound the scraping of our shoes as we walked.

Three or four miles farther on we reached a copse. It was just visible against the sky, a dark mass a few hundred yards from the road. Jane put her hand on my arm and stopped. A nightingale was singing. I'd never been over-impressed by them but right then the sound was the loveliest thing I'd heard. The piping was sweet and effortless. Soon the bird was joined by another and another. The

wood was alive. It was the first bird-song I'd heard for two days.

We must have stood for a quarter of an hour or more just listening. Somehow at that time I didn't doubt the human race was fighting a battle for existence. I wondered suddenly if we were worth a victory. Taken overall, our species hadn't made much of a fist of things. Maybe it would be better to leave Earth to the nightingales, to a sort of bird-haunted peace.

The mood was passed in a few moments. The idea might have been grandiose but you can't hold on to things like that very long. The human race wasn't a statistic, it was people. Folk like Ted and Neil, and Jane. What was I doing, wishing them dead for some cynical abstraction? I didn't want them dead. Very particularly I didn't want Jane dead. I moved closer to her, instinctively. I think she understood just what I was feeling. She linked her arm in mine. She said "We'd best get on, Bill. Find a place to sleep." We moved unwillingly down the road.

The character of the country had changed a lot in the last couple of miles. The land was still rolling but the hills were smaller and more wooded, lacking the miles-long contours of the Downs. This was one of the areas where the boundary of the great Plain was fairly well defined. I was glad of it; if we were attacked there was a much better chance of finding cover.

A little farther on we got to a signpost. I'd remembered to pack a torch; by its light we saw that if we turned left down a tree-lined lane we would come to Burton Middlemarsh. The name sounded inviting at least. We followed the direction and reached a straggle of cottages. As far as I could see they were undamaged.

We hung about cautiously for some time. The little village looked deserted but we'd learned not to take chances. Eventually I edged up to the front door of one of the houses and knocked. Nobody came. I tried the latch; the place was locked up. So was the second, and the third.

Surprisingly, the fourth showed a crack of light. I knocked; there was a long wait then I heard a shuffling inside. A slightly querulous voice said "Who is it then?"

Jane answered. "We're lost. We were trying to get to

the coast but our . . . car broke down. Can you help us please?"

I heard bolts being withdrawn. The door opened a few inches, showed an old lady in apron and carpet slippers, cardigan clutched round her shoulders. She said "Just the two on yer, is it?"

I'd got Sek to me. I was standing touching her collar lightly with my fingers. I said "There's a dog."

The old woman saw her for the first time and edged back. She said "Oh, my word . . ." Jane said quickly "We're all right, honestly. I'm Jane Smythe, this is Bill Sampson. We were with some soldiers but they left us. We wanted to get to Swyreford." The old lady dithered. Then, "You'd better come in . . ." She opened the door the rest of the way.

I wriggled out of the flamethrower harness, laid the thing down in the hall and followed the others into the one lit room. It was a homely little place. An elderly television set stood in one corner and there was a cage with a canary, and an old-fashioned open grate. The window curtains were partly drawn; I saw the panes beyond had been blocked with a variety of oddments, newspapers, bits of cloth, a dismantled cardboard carton. In one wall was a door that obviously led to the kitchen. Its panels had been split from top to bottom; there was white wood showing, and long splinters. I looked quickly at Jane. The damage was horribly suggestive. The old lady said uncertainly "Place ain't fit to be seen, not by rights. All this muck an' stuff everywhere . . . Sit ye down, anyhow." She started hauling chairs about. "Is that dog safe?"

Sek had investigated the hearthrug briefly with her nose and curled up on it with a grunt. She was watching me, chin on paws. I said "She's all right, she won't be any trouble."

"Got a cat round somewhere," said the old lady. "Or at least I 'ad. 'Aven't seen her since this mornin'. Such comin's an' goin's, I never seen anything like it I'm sure. Look at that . . ." She glared at the blocked window. "Messed all the paint, using pins an' that tape stuff . . . I wouldn't 'ave bothered only that young feller we 'ad round, he told me I better. Just like the war it's bin, all over. I

don't know . . ." She changed her tack abruptly. "Want a cuppa?"

The normality of the question floored me. For a moment I couldn't answer. Jane said "We'd just love one if it isn't too much bother. But please don't put yourself about, Mrs. . . ."

"Stilwell," said the old lady. "And it ain't no trouble." She stumped for the kitchen. "We still got gas, but the water 'as ter be *drawn* . . . Lucky we got a well." I heard a clanking as she worked the old farmhouse-style pump. "It's all right after it's boiled," she said. "It's good an' fresh out o' the well, always 'as bin." She paused. "Chalk," she added equivocally.

We introduced ourselves a little more fully. She was a widow, she'd been living on her own. A couple of nights before she'd woken to find the whole house swaying and groaning. But the 'quake had passed without doing any real damage. It was a miracle the village hadn't been destroyed, it stood well inside the Wiltshire meizoseismal area. Old Mrs. Stilwell had lain and listened to the shocks tearing past. "Like express trains" she said. "Just like express trains, all night long." Sometime in the early morning the Army had arrived and set about evacuating the place. "They had these trucks" she explained. "Just like in the war . . . Pilin' everybody in, I never seen nothing like it . . ." A percentage of able-bodied men had elected to stay and guard their property and Mrs. Stilwell had likewise refused to budge. "I told this young bloke" she said. "'I'm too old for this sort o' thing' I told him. 'I'll bide. Got my son John comin' I have, we'll see what he says. Turnin' out in the middle o' the night' I says. 'Never come across anything like this . . .'"

The officer had evidently had little time to argue. He'd advised her to stay indoors and show no lights after dark. He'd said a truck would be coming through later in the day to pick up stragglers. But the truck had never arrived, neither had her son. Instead the Furies had come. "Nasty hairy things" said the old lady with great distaste. "Crawlin' all over the place, you should just see the mess upstairs. Had the wardrobes over they did, an' all the stuff pulled out. Acted like they owned the place . . ."

I said incredulously "The wasps got in here?"

She pointed at the wrecked door. "What do ee think done that?" she asked bitterly. "Two of 'em there were, great hairy noisy things bigger'n dogs. Not as big as yourn maybe." She nodded to where Sek was still sprawled on the hearth.

Jane had her eyes on my face. I wanted to ask the old lady why she was still alive but I didn't know how to phrase it. I said "What did you do, when the wasps got in?"

Mrs. Stilwell compressed her lips at the memory. "Couldn't *do* much, could I? Big lumpy things, fannin' everything down wi' their wings, rummagin' all over like they owned the place. Stuff all pilin' off the shelves . . . I gid en one or two, I tell ee. Laid into en, but it didn't make no difference. Scramblin' about, you should see the mess they made. That were when they done the door, when I were lummockin' at en."

I said "You hit them? What on earth with?"

"Carpet beater" said the old woman with a hint of pride. "First thing that come to 'and . . ."

I looked at Jane again and shook my head, baffled. The words conjured a crazy image. The Furies, deadlier than vipers and fast as cats, booming through the house with the indignant old lady puffing behind, swiping at the horrors with a common or garden carpet beater. It was the first time I'd heard of the wasps not attacking on sight. These hadn't even retaliated. Just searched the place, quickly and destructively, looking for what? Victims? They'd had one treading close behind their armoured tails. The thing was a complete mystery. We tried to suggest less belligerence next time but Mrs. Stilwell was firm. "Not havin' 'em in my house" she declared. "Not while I can do anythin' about it anyways. Not sittin' here lettin' 'em have the run o' the place. Wouldn't be sense, would it?"

We gave up.

She insisted that we stay the night. We argued about it; we were sure our presence would constitute an added danger. But Mrs. Stilwell was adamant; if we were to be killed, it would be in the Lord's good time. She clinched her argument by pointing at Jane's dress. "*Look* at yer,"

she said. "Bin dragged through 'edge backards, I shouldn't wonder . . ." And then, cunningly, "What you needs, m'dear, is a good bath an' a change o' clothes. Got some things young Ellen left 'ere, my son's daughter; you can use them. Don't know when she'll be back for 'em now . . . You'll have ter lump the water up from the kitchen but I reckon that won't hurt, there's plenty an' enough in the well . . ."

Jane looked blissful.

We sat down an hour later feeling almost human again. Jane was neatly dressed in blue jeans and a white shirt, her hair was brushed again and glossy and I'd managed to shave. The old lady fed us with canned soup; it was all she had in the house. I hadn't realized until she set the bowl in front of me how hungry I was. While we were eating she elaborated her opinions of recent events. "Just like the war it's bin," she said again. "All the time wonderin' if them Germans were comin'. My hubby were alive then o' course, Home Guard he was. We used ter sit an' hear them planes all the time, throbbin' and' throbbin'. Just like the war it's bin, them things flying' all about . . ."

We tried to give her some idea of what had been happening but I don't think she took much of it in. She was more worried about her broken door. "Have to get John to fix it when 'e comes," she said. "I tried, but my fingers ain't no good fer that sort o' thing no more. Time were when I could 'ave done it easy enough . . . Only when 'e'll come is more than I can say . . ." She sniffed suddenly. "Even the roses," she said. "Nice little standards I'd got, had 'em years. They took them orf at the roots, just snipped 'em through. Why they done that I don't know. I'm gettin' too old fer this sort o' thing, I didn't want no more on it . . ." She went back to the kitchen and we heard her calling her lost cat. Jane shook her head helplessly. It was hard to know what to say; after all there had been death here too, of a sort . . .

I slept between sheets again that night. Sek came upstairs with me. "I don't normally take dogs," said the old lady incongruously. "More trouble than they're worth. But seein' how things are, it won't matter. Things aren't normal; you couldn't call 'em normal . . ."

My last conscious thought was of the Furies. I'd left the flamethrower downstairs ; it would be no use to me in the house anyway : if they did crash the windows I'd be dead almost before I'd had time to move. I was too tired to be anything other than fatalistic ; I turned over, and was asleep almost at once.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I woke at dawn but somebody was up before me. From downstairs came sounds of hammering. When I got down Jane had fixed the door. She'd made a good job of it too. The old lady was almost absurdly grateful ; she refused to take anything for our stay. "No good havin' money no more" she said fretfully. "Went down to the shop yesterday, wasn't nobody there. Could've helped meself for all it mattered . . ."

We promised to try and get her some food. We left the house about half past six. I had no clear idea of what I intended to do. I carried the flamethrower ; I was beginning to get used to its weight.

Nearly the first thing we saw was a little garage. I went inside carefully. It was dark in there and cool, with that typical smell of petrol and oil and greasy rags. There were several cars in the place ; one caught my attention at once. Just inside the doors stood a big stocker, garishly decorated along the sides with not very successful flame painting.

I walked round her. From the cab and chassis it looked as if she'd started life as a vee-eight Pilot, though the block that squatted between her nonexistent wings had never been made by Ford. She carried no glass of course, and her doors had been welded shut. I saw that someone had reinforced her frame with what looked like lengths of railway line.

There was nobody about. I turned the ignition and touched the starter ; the car fired and kept running with a heavy, irregular blatting from her exhaust. I switched off again. She was a temptation ; she was the nearest thing to a tank I would be likely to find and she seemed to be in

racing trim as well ; it looked as if she'd just been overhauled. But it was useless to think of driving ; to take any motor out on the road would be the surest and quickest way to the next world, I had no doubt of that.

Jane disagreed. She'd been ferrcting round the back of the workshop. In one corner was a pile of mild steel rods ; she pulled one out and brought it across. It was nearly an inch in diameter and five or six feet long. Obviously they'd intended using the stuff for further monsters like the one that was sitting glaring at us. Jane said thoughtfully "If there was a way to cover her windows, Bill. They aren't very big, and the wasps would never bite through these. We could get to Swyreford in a couple of hours if we could drive again."

Something of the sort had gone through my mind but I shook my head. "It'd take hours. And in any case it wouldn't be safe. Remember what they did with the Saracen. If they got on top we'd never keep them out."

She said "But we've got the flame gun, they're scared stiff of those. If we went fast enough they couldn't land anyway, there's nothing for them to hold. If they tried they'd just keep skidding off. And we could go at night. They probably wouldn't even see us."

She had a point there. I was crazy to think we'd ever get away with it but I was sick-tired of running ; in the open we weren't safe from one minute to the next. I said "We'll think about it, love. Let's go find some food for the old lady. And we can see if there's anybody about as well."

We searched the village. It didn't take long ; it was only a tiny place, there weren't above a score of houses. One or two of the cottage doors stood open ; I remembered the people who'd chosen to stay and went inside expecting horrors, but everywhere was empty. I scratched my head ; there was something new here, a factor we hadn't come across before.

The last place we tried was a biggish house set back some distance from the main street. It was deserted too but we found a good stock of tinned food. We'd brought the haversack ; I loaded it without too much hesitation. My inhibitions about that sort of thing had already gone by the board.

I found something else too, a rack of guns. I 'borrowed' a twelve bore and enough cartridges to start a private war. I felt better for that ; I'd been worrying about the fuel supply for the flamethrower. I didn't know how long the shoulder packs lasted but they couldn't have much duration. We were heavily loaded by the time we got down to the road again.

We were very nearly jumped by three Furies. They came through the village low and fast, bunched together in a tight vic. We got under some shrubbery just in time and watched them go. They flew down the main street, swung right and vanished ; a few moments later they were back. They roared away in the direction from which they'd come. I glared after them. They looked just what they were, a patrol quartering captured territory to check for signs of resistance. I started to swear under my breath ; in just over two days I'd been converted from a free, comparatively rational human being to something with about the status of a rabbit, a hunted thing that skinned under a hedgerow every time the wind blew. We let the sounds die away then Jane said urgently "We'll just never do it on foot, Bill. It's got to be the car."

I said "Yeah, looks like it." My heart came up into my throat and wedged there at the mere thought, but it seemed she was right. I stood up. "Come on, let's drop the food off and go have a look at the thing again."

I don't think I've ever worked so hard or so long as I did over that motor. I made a sort of bridle to fit over the end of the scuttle just in front of the firewall and welded bars at six inch intervals between it and the roof. I was slow at first ; as I got more practised I speeded up a lot. I'd used acetylene gear before, though not for a year or two. I fixed a couple of transverse struts under the first set for general strengthening, then treated the side and rear windows to a pair of bars apiece. I ran out of gas as I was welding the last of them in place. I had to leave the driving window alone ; with our windscreen caged that was the only means of entry.

I stood back and studied what I'd done. The car looked more hideous than ever but she was as safe as I could make her. I tested the windscreen bars with my hands ;

they felt like the Rock of Gibraltar. I guessed the weak point would be the welds where they joined roof and doors. If things went as planned that wouldn't be put to the test ; I could only hope we'd get through without attracting half the wasps in the West Country, if they came for us *en masse* we'd be finished.

I checked the time by the wall clock. Twenty to ten ; the patrol had last appeared at eight and they'd been coming over at two hour intervals all day, you could have set a watch by them. If we were going to clear the village before their next tour we'd better get mobile. We climbed aboard ; I had a little trouble making Sek understand what I wanted but when she got the message she went through the window easily enough. The flamethrower and the spare fuel can went between us on the front seat, I loaded the shotgun and propped it beside me with the barrel pointed out between the bars. Not very safe but I had no choice, I knew if we needed it we should need it in a hurry. Then I started up and edged out onto the road.

Our luck was lousy from the start. We ran straight into the patrol ; why they'd varied their routine I don't know, they weren't due for another ten minutes at least. They didn't hesitate when they saw us, just dived straight in.

I tried to brake but I was nowhere quick enough. I was still moving very fast when the leader hit us. The tactic was obvious ; had we been a normal car the thing would have come straight through the screen, probably decapitating the driver in the process. But of course we were far from being a normal car ; the wasp struck the cagework with a colossal wallop, bounced off, sailed over the roof and landed somewhere behind us. The impact slewed the Ford across the road but the bars held. The remaining Furies zoomed clear at the last moment ; before I'd got the Ford stopped they were heading in to the attack again.

Unexpectedly, I found I had all the time in the world. The brutes needed a pretty long run-up. I hugged the twelve bore, waiting for them to close. I'd had a fair bit to do with smooth bore guns, this was more in my line. Jane was screaming but I let the wasps get nearly on top of the barrels before I fired. I was sitting awkwardly ; the recoils nearly broke my shoulder but it was worth it.

One of the Furies simply flew apart, came down in a spatter of pinkish flesh and black and yellow shreds. The other was grounded; I saw it crawl out of the ditch and hump painfully toward us. I rammed the car into gear and drove at it. The offside front wheel mounted its thorax but the thing didn't crack. It twisted its face like a puppy, trying to bite the tyre. Jane was shouting "It's head, it's head . . ." I reversed, yanked at the steering. There was a crunch, and that was the end of the fight.

I drove off like a bat from Hell. I don't know why I instinctively assumed the things would be telepathic but I'd got no doubt the three we'd killed had been yelling for reinforcements as hard as they could. I watched the sky anxiously, expecting to see more wasps, but nothing happened. We got clear.

A few miles farther on I pulled off the road under the cover of some trees. I lit a cigarette, the last one in the packet. I won't pretend I wasn't feeling good. It was the first positive blow we'd struck and it had been pretty effective, we'd wiped up three of the bastards without any real trouble. Jane was grinning like a monkey. She said "It's all right Bill, it works. We shall make it, they'll leave us alone now." I looked for some wood to touch. We were still a Hell of a way from the coast.

I was better orientated now and it did seem the sea was the best bet. If we could get to the water we'd have three Army camps between us and the wasps, Swyreford inland a few miles, Lulworth and Colton each side of it. Surely they'd constitute a front line. And we'd be between the great naval bases of Portsmouth and Portland, they couldn't have been knocked out. I expected a lot of people would have had the same idea and that the area would be crawling with refugees but that was something we'd worry about when we got there. I was still assuming of course that the menace was limited; in actual fact the Furies had already extended their sphere of operations far beyond Salisbury Plain, striking north into the industrial Midlands and south and west into Dorset, while their scouts had linked up with the nests re-established in Somerset. Perhaps at the time it was better that I didn't know how hemmed in we were.

I didn't move again until the moon had risen. It was bright, a couple of days off full. That helped a lot as the car had no headlights. We made good time for half an hour or so then the sky clouded over. Simultaneously we came to crevasses again.

I kept going but it soon became obvious we'd travel faster on foot. I knew we couldn't rely on darkness much beyond four a.m. It was difficult to know what to do ; I didn't want to leave the Ford but it looked as if I was going to be forced to.

Jane gave me the answer. I was edging along, trying not to put my wheels down a yard-wide fissure that was just visible in the stray gleams of moonlight, when she said suddenly "If it's any help, I can drive."

"What?"

She said "I thought if you were tired you might like a break . . ."

"I didn't think you were old enough."

She made a noise like a bad-tempered pony. "I could drive Daddy's car when I was ten, I used to go tearing round and round the flower beds when nobody was about."

"Could you cope with this one?"

"I think so."

I said "Well there's nothing like finding out . . ." I stopped, put the flamethrower out of the window and got through myself. Exiting was considerably harder than getting in. I slung the pressure can on my back, went round to the front of the car and squatted on the fender with a torch. That way I could signal Jane and call to her and we made a bit better time at least. She did very well ; there were a couple of initial jerks that threw me back into the open rad core but after that she got the feel of the clutch and settled down. I suppose we made between five and ten miles an hour on the better stretches.

It wasn't enough. By four-thirty the sky was bright enough to make the torch unnecessary and Swyreford was still ten miles away. I took over again. All we needed was a bit of luck ; one quick dash and we'd be home and dry.

We were five miles from the camp, with the hills dead ahead, when the way was barred by a great fallen tree. It was a nasty sort of thing to see in the dawn light ; there

were broken branches and huge black roots that seemed to writhe up miles in the air. Jane shivered, and I backed the car away. There was no chance of going round ; the ground to each side was churned and broken, I could see the Ford bogging to her axles if I drove onto it. A hundred yards or so below the obstruction a lane branched off to the right. I took it. Within minutes we were spotted by the Furies.

I'd got my eye on a copse half a mile or so ahead that offered some chance of hiding, I'd been wondering whether to lay up there till the evening again. Some half a dozen insects came into sight ahead ; I stopped instantly but they didn't attack. Within minutes I saw the reason why. The sky became full of the brutes, wheeling and circling. It went through my mind that after the incident of the night before they'd decided the car was an armoured vehicle and were proceeding accordingly. They were going to mob us.

I'm not sure what my feelings were at the time. I think after I realized we were as good as dead a sort of numbness set in. I looked at Jane ; there were about half a hundred things I wanted to say but there wasn't time for any of them ; the Furies were already coming in.

I can remember firing at the first wave of attackers, and the second and third. After that things got really hectic. Some of the wasps had already managed to land ; we couldn't watch all directions at once and anyway I could only shoot forward. Two Furies were chipping at the back window and Sek was snarling and trying to get her head through the bars to reach them with her teeth. It was only a question of minutes before one of the insects got to the driving door, it was a wonder they hadn't found it already. The cab was full of fumes and my eyes were starting to smart. I yelled to Jane and grabbed the flamethrower. The gun was awkward to handle inside the car ; she lifted the pressure container, I stuffed the nozzle as far through the windscreen bars as I could and pressed the trigger. The effect was startling. The wasps sheered off in all directions ; I could hardly believe my eyes.

I pulled the starter, shoved the Ford in gear and wound her up in first. The Furies had reverted to plan B ; 'land where possible, ride vehicle until occupants emerge.' Only

they couldn't ride the Ford; Jane had been right about that at least. We soon lost the little people from the roof and after that each boarder met the same fate. There'd be a bang and a slither, then just another wasp kicking in the road behind us.

I kept up the fastest pace I could and fortunately the driving surface didn't get worse. I managed to keep the things from coming to close quarters again but all the time I was conscious that we were being forced West, away from the place we'd been trying to reach. I took three or four left turns, trying to circle back towards Swyreford, but it was no good. I got lost in a maze of backroads. I started to sweat again; the Furies stayed with us, booming overhead in a cloud.

By six a.m. I was out of the back blocks but the situation was getting desperate. I'd given up the idea of reaching Swyreford; I was wondering if I could get to the coast somewhere near Weymouth. By the look of the tank gauge we'd got petrol for another ten miles or so, after that what would happen was anybody's guess. I tried to tell Jane what I was doing; she leaned across and put her ear close to my face but it was still hard to make her understand. The row inside the Ford was terrific; the engine was practically unsilenced and the tyres were shrieking on the corners as the direct drive skidded us round.

We crabbed out of a final bend and the view widened ahead. Jane shrieked something and started to point. Away to our left the land shelved into a bowl a mile or more across; and for hundreds of yards, as far as I could see, the grass was covered by a weird encrustation. It was as if somebody had let a king-size bowl of porridge boil over and spill down the slope. It was a few seconds before I realized what I was looking at. It was a nest, or a city. The wasps had given up all attempt at concealment and allowed their woodpulp shanties to sprawl across the hill. There were combs and great brood cells all made of the same flimsy stuff; over them by way of protection they'd hauled all the junk imaginable, bolts of cloth and coco-matting, sheets of galvanised iron, chunks of linoleum, sections torn from fences, bits of furniture, even old motor car tyres and wheels. It was like a mile-wide corporation

tip. Above the rubbish the Furies hung in a golden haze ; the thousands of wings made a deep rumbling, like the noise of a massive waterfall.

I didn't have any time to stare. As we came in sight of the crazy stronghold the number of wasps round the car doubled or trebled. Their buzzing rose to a fine pitch of rage ; they were diving again now, repeatedly, hurling themselves at the windscreen bars. One of the brutes managed to get a grip on the cage ; Jane knocked it clear somehow with the barrel of the flamethrower. It fell forward out of sight, there was a crash, a hail of black and yellow chips. Steam gushed back. The wasp had torn up the fan, damaged the rad. I hung onto the steering while the Ford was chucked from one side of the road to the other. I don't know how we avoided turning over. I saw the bars in front of me start to split under the battering ; a few more wallops would knock the whole frame clear of the car.

The rain saved us. As I'd been passing the great nest I'd seen black clouds building up ahead ; a couple of miles farther on the first spots lashed in through the windscreen opening. Jane spat and coughed and the next second we were driving through a downpour and I could barely see the road. I stamped on the brake, and realized that for the first time in an hour we were free of wasps. If they were still flying their speed had been cut ; they could no longer keep pace with us.

I throttled up again, forcing the car along. She was losing water fast, every minute we could gain was precious now. I squinted, trying to see through the rain. I was soaked already ; beside me Jane was holding her arms across her face. I shouted to her and she looked round and yelled something about the engine. I called "It's all right . . ." We were climbing now, into the hills that guard most of the Dorset shoreline. Another quarter of an hour, twenty minutes at the outside, and we must reach the coast.

Abruptly the sea came into sight, grey-green and huge, dizzily vague, flecked with white where the squall was lashing at the waves. A turn of the road and we'd lost it again, but I knew where I was ; just above Barford Regis,

some six or eight miles east of Weymouth. I remembered the place from happier days; it was only tiny, a fishing village turned tourist centre, but there had been boats of all kinds there. I prayed to God they hadn't all gone.

We bounced down the hill into Barford with the engine knocking and missing and the fuel pointer banging against its stop. Whatever else happened, the car was through. I turned left then right, still half blinded, straightened up, accelerated and drove onto the quay. The boats were still there; yachts and cabin cruisers, all sorts of craft. I saw armoured vehicles drawn up, a Saladin that looked very like Neil's but there was nobody around. The place was another ghost town.

I scrambled through the window, got up and pulled Jane clear. I started to run, holding her arm and yelling to Sek to come on. The rain was pelting down harder than ever; I jumped some steps, onto a boat, across it to another . . . My foot skidded, I nearly took a header in the sea. Jane grabbed at me; I rocked about, got my balance again, swung down to the deck of a cabin cruiser. She was locked; I turned round, looking for something I could use to break in. Jane was pulling my arm and shouting. "Over there . . ."

We went back the way we'd come with Sek staggering along behind. The second boat was big, powerful-looking; for some reason I noticed the name on her bow. *Enchantress* . . . The cabin door was slid back; I ducked through it into a little cockpit, saw a dashboard, a neat wheel. Jane collided with me. She said jubilantly "I can drive her, we had one just like her last year . . ." She twisted a switch, pulled something that looked like a starter. I heard the engine wake up; white water boiled under the counter and the boat swung out, snubbing at her ropes. I said "Sek . . . Jane, where's the dog . . ."

She looked up and I saw her jaw sag. I ran out of the wheelhouse, stood staring. They were coming; a long line of them, greyish dots in the downpour, water milling away from their wings . . .

I heard Sek barking; Jane was yanking at me. She was screaming "Come on, oh Bill, come *on* . . ."

But it was no good, we'd never race them with the boat. I could see it all clearly; to us it wouldn't matter if their

flight range was ten miles or five or three. They'd take us, out on the water. They'd never let us be.

I knew what I had to do, it was just I couldn't make Jane understand. I was trying to shove her off but she wouldn't let go. I bawled at her. "Get in the cabin, get out of sight. Then head for the Isle of Wight . . ." I knew they'd follow the car. I could lead them off, lose them in the rain, circle back . . .

She had her feet braced on the deck, she'd got my wrist, she was pulling that hard it was all I could do to keep hold of the rail. She screamed "I can't . . ."

"Jane, for God's sake . . ."

"I can't, I can't, I can't . . ."

I swore at the top of my voice, twisted and shoved. I saw her fall against the wheelhouse and didn't wait for any more. I vaulted back onto the quay and started to run. I knew I shouldn't make it now, the things were too close, they were diving . . .

I'd forgotten Sek. She passed me as if I was standing still, racing to head them off. She hit the first wasp full bore; it didn't even check her. The Fury, already rain-sodden, bundled across the quay and fell over the edge. She fetched the second one down somehow, twisted out from under it and smashed its head in her teeth. I skidded and fell, rolled across the ground and saw a third insect come down astride her back. She writhed round but the sting was already darting in and out of her flank. She bucked convulsively, started a high jarring scream.

I collided with the car door, sobbing. I couldn't help my dog, she was as good as dead . . . I got in somehow, grabbed for the starter. The engine fired roughly. I saw Sek's head bearded with foam, thrust up from a black and yellow ball of wasps; then the shrieking cut off and the whole fight rolled toward the water. I accelerated, a sidestreet jumped at me, I hauled the wheel, there was a crash, a noise of glass, the car wrenched back straight and kept going. I howled through the little town not caring if I rolled the Ford and died. I was expecting the engine to seize. It didn't. Instead, I ran dry of petrol.

I got out. I was about five miles from Barford; the rain had eased, and there was no sign of the Furies. I walked off

carrying the flame gun, holed up under the hedge a few hundred yards away. I lay waiting, digging my nails in my palms. If they didn't come it would mean they'd stopped and searched, found Jane . . . I started to pray again. Let them come ; dear God, let them be after me . . .

They did come, a score of the murderers. They wind-milled down to the car, crawled all over it, in and out through the glassless screen and driving door. I left them to it, I don't know how long they stayed.

It was dusk before I got back to Barford. The whole of the area was buzzing with insects, I'd had to take cover a score of times while they quartered the ground nearby. Toward evening they sheered off and by the time I reached the houses everything was quiet. When I came in sight of the quay I saw *Enchantress* had gone ; I ran the rest of the way to where the fight had been. There were no traces left ; the rain had washed out any bloodstains and there was no sign of Sek, not a hair of her. I sat for a few moments with my head in my hands then I got up and looked over the water. The sun was setting behind a ragged mass of cloud ; to the south-east, low down near the horizon, I could just make out a band of grey. The Isle of Wight. In front of it was a dark speck ; I played with the idea that it was *Enchantress*, lying out there waiting for me. But I was being crazy, I knew it was only a buoy. I went looking for a boat of my own.

I settled for a sturdy fourteen footer with an inboard power unit. At least I could start her, and the engine sounded smooth. There was plenty of petrol in her tank, and a spare gallon can in the stern locker. I didn't waste any time, just laid the flame gun down on the bottom boards, shipped the rudder and tiller and headed out from the land.

I reached the buoy I'd seen and looked back past it ; the coast was just a shadow. Ahead, the Island had vanished. Night was coming fast ; I was afloat in a steel-grey void. Half an hour or so later a wind got up from the south-west, bringing with it a cold lashing rain. I turned up my jacket collar and hunched my back ; my hand felt frozen to the tiller and I was shivering violently. Soon the boat was rolling and pitching and the waves round me were

soaring and tipped with foam. The mainland had gone now, blotted out behind a watery shadow-show. I had no idea where the boat was pointed, and to make things worse she was starting to take water. I kept staring round, wanting to see a light and find it was *Enchantress*, but there was nothing. Just the rain hissing into the sea, and the dark. I started to lose hope. It seemed I'd spent half my life waiting for a light, waiting for a boat. But the boat had never come . . .

Sometime that night the engine gave out. I'd managed to turn the dinghy into the wind, nearly swamping her in the process, and for a time she'd ridden easier, but with no way on her she simply corkscrewed about, dropping into the trough of wave after wave. I tinkered with the little block, working blind; I dried out round the plug as well as I could and tried to swing her but it was no use. I thought about getting the oars out but I was past making an effort like that. Instead I found a dipper and tried to keep the boat as clear of water as I could. Toward dawn the wind fell and I sprawled down on the bottom boards, thoroughly worn out. I slept a bit; when I woke the sun was up and the sea calm. I looked round dizzily. I was close in to some odd-looking cliffs. They were grey-black and huge and looked to be made of a sort of peat. From beneath them long flat stone ledges thrust out into the sea.

I rowed in. When the boat touched I got out and dragged her up as high as I could. I dried the flamethrower and tried to fire it. It worked, but the fuel cut out almost instantly. The canister was empty, and I'd left the spare in the Ford. That was it then; I slung the thing back in the boat.

Up close, the cliffs looked menacing. They were fibrous and bulging, sodden with rain. High over my head stone strata jutted like lines of amber teeth. I worked my way round the headland, scrambling over a litter of fallen blocks, and came to a bay. It was nearly circular and mill-pond still. Beyond was a hillside of dull grass, blotched with patches of gorse and bramble. I saw a line of blackened brick cottages, a jetty stacked with lobster pots. I wondered where the devil I was; there was something mournful and grim about the place that didn't fit with any

parts of the Island I remembered. Maybe I'd drifted right round it and come in on the southern side.

I walked a couple of miles before I got to a signpost. I stood and stared at it, then I sat down. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Dorchester nine, Poole sixteen. I was back on the mainland again . . .

I'd got to find another boat, start all over, look for Jane. I walked till midday, moving west parallel with the coast. The sun got hotter ; on either side of me the heath began to shimmer. Eventually I reached a village. I still don't know its name. Halfway along the High Street was a pub. The front door stood open ; I went in and shouted. Nobody answered. I collapsed against a wall, slid down it and just lay. When I felt better I went behind the counter, knocked up the spile of the first barrel I came to and poured myself a pint. I laced it with Scotch, raised it to the sky and drank. It was a funeral party for one, the only ritual Sek ever had.

After that I just don't know what happened. I'd intended to push on, find another boat ; but I was soaked through and stiff, my feet were bleeding and I'd already spent half the night looking for one little girl on an ocean as big as the universe. I remember telling myself I had to rest, I'd just sit and drink another beer, maybe doze awhile, then I'd be away. The second beer tasted great. So did the third.

I think altogether I must have put down about four or five, and after that I couldn't have gone far if I wanted to. I hadn't eaten for a while of course ; I suppose my stomach just couldn't take the swilling I'd given it. I tried to reason with myself but it was too late. The drink had hold of me and I knew I'd never done a damn thing right in my life and it was no use trying. I'd killed my girl and I'd killed my dog ; I was beat, the wasps were everywhere and we were through. Well, if I was only fit for getting drunk I'd try and make a job of it. I managed to edge my way back to the barrels and poured out another tankard . . .

Sometime in the afternoon Jane walked through the bar. I called her but she wouldn't come. She was smart ; she stayed just outside the range of my vision, flitting about like a little wraith. Sek was there somewhere too, but I

couldn't let her in. I pleaded with both of them, then lost my temper and damned them to all eternity. Then, mercifully, I passed out like a light.

When I came round it was evening, and very still. Sunlight was slanting across the village street, touching the stone roofs with gold. I sat up; the silence of the place was a reproach. I tried to get to my feet and pain clattered round inside my head. I swore, knuckled my eyes. My gutlessness had lost me a full day but it wasn't too late. It was never too late. I tried to think. Where to find a boat . . . Get to the coast, find a boat . . . find Jane . . .

I heard an engine, and a sound of singing.

I stood in the pub doorway, rocking slightly from the effects of the jug-up. I was still glaring about vaguely when an ancient lorry came round the corner of the street, stopped alongside with a screech of worn linings. I looked up at it, trying to focus. The back was open and it was crammed with people. They were laughing and cheering and every other one seemed to be waving a bottle. I saw a little man in a striped, collarless shirt, three or four beefy farming types, a heap of girls with long untidy hair and leather jerkins, a bearded boy in a fisherknit sweater, guitar slung round his neck. It looked like an artists' colony gone haywire. I reeled round to the tailboard. I said thickly "Wha' the Hell goes on . . ."

Fingers gripped my arms. One of the popsies started to scream with laughter. Somebody said "Come on whack, join the party . . ." I landed in the truck and it careered off down the street. A bottle was shoved in my hand. A voice shouted "Drink up, th' war's over."

I tried to take it in. "What happened? Are the wasps dead?"

Laughter broke like a wave. A blonde lurched across the lorry, tried to grab the bottle and fell over my knees. She jerked her thumb at the top of the cab, giggling. I looked up and for the first time saw the Fury, straddling the metal with its wide-spread legs and staring disinterestedly down at its human load.

To be continued.

A DISTORTING MIRROR

by R. W. Mackelworth

From the nicely groomed pat of his head, to the flowing lines of his round little body, he was as perfect an example of bumbledom as ever squeezed behind a desk. Yet he was more than just another knot in the endless red tape that tied life in the Organisation together. He was a leader, a manager of other people's lives, and a power to be reckoned with.

Lewis McGraw, with an unusual urge for aggression, had been thinking it would be satisfying to punch him. A well placed left would have achieved maximum effect with minimum effort. Otherwise a neat right hook would have served as well. Ever since the introductory sherry in the Reception, the smooth curve of the man's jaw had been tempting him, like the wild voice of a Lorelei maiden. The simile shocked him, even as he thought of it. He had never harboured that kind of fantasy in his mind before.

He consoled himself. If he made an assault, of any kind, it would be as well considered as any other precision job he had undertaken. It was merely that, once or twice in a life-time, violence seemed to be the only answer.

The Manager sensed the feeling, as he expected he would, and he sensed the even greater tension in the girl, too. The subtle corrosion of the mild drug they had taken with their drink earlier, was playing havoc with their inhibitions and self control.

Lewis knew positively Jane was holding similar impulses at bay, with the greatest difficulty. For a slip of a girl she had plenty of guts. He was proud of her spirit, very definitely proud, as only a man, normally phlegmatic to the point of total silence, could be.

It had been her temper which had attracted him in the first place. There had been a day, he remembered, when she

told the Departmental Superintendent where to get off, a hot sultry day when everything was out of tune. What an outburst it had been!

The old man had been grinding away at them for hours, as if he had a porcupine in his belly, and he had worn them all into a frazzle. No one had the courage to tell him to button his lip. No one except Jane that was.

It was odd that the ancient streak of misery hadn't reported her. He usually reported every action, every word, by the simple expedient of gabbling wickedly into a Recorder microphone, as they occurred. Instead, he shut up instantly, like a mouse trap sprung by a jackboot, and he brooded in his little glass castle for the rest of the day, apparently beaten and dejected.

Now it was the Housing Manager who was droning on. Lewis was hardly listening and again it was out of character. In fact he found it hardly possible to lift his eyes from the name plate fixed to the desk in front of him. It labelled the Manager with his name. Montague Capulet was hardly a name, and it hardly suited him, but there it was, and without the damning, social tag of a works number.

The name had to be a jocular disguise. Capulet was known for his disregard for the finer feelings of man and wife, or the early bloom of lovers. He pushed emotion into the Company's square boxes, graced with the name of housing, as if emotion was smaller than the bodies that held it. A hard, untouched character, yet he had a smooth, persuasive tongue.

There he was, buzzing away with honeyed benevolence, seemingly helpful, like an overfed bee in the warmth of a garden. He was all sincerity. Perhaps that was why they had put him in charge of housing. Underneath though, there was a businesslike mind worthy of greater things. Capulet was more than gentle persuasion and it was as well to remember it.

"We just have to narrow it down to a simple choice." He lifted his hands, palm upwards, in an eloquent appeal. "Not that it's as bad as all that. You can go to Residential District Three or to any of the Community Groups. In my opinion there is nothing newly weds could dislike in any of

them. You will find everything from Recreational facilities to Hospitals at hand. You couldn't fail to be happy with such an active, healthy life."

"Try us."

The wide eyes rolled in the fat face, and lighted on Jane, with the kind of distrust a big wheel has for a small cog, which abhors its place in the scheme of things. Then one eye flickered tentatively at her husband and, for a moment, there was mute appeal and just a little hope in it.

Lewis stared at him with flagrant disinterest.

Capulet seemed to be disillusioned, but there was a gleam in his eye. Perversely, he ignored the resistance, the contempt with which the couple were treating his efforts. It was as if he wanted to rub their noses in his unctuous advice. He was as bouncing and moralising as a Dickensian uncle. "I think there is great satisfaction in making one's way in the world. One careful step after another. First foot on the ladder and a steady hand at the helm."

They were both as unresponsive as brick walls.

He was pleased with them, enormously pleased. They were tightened up inside, fighting the unsuspected effect of the drug, and every word he had said was fuel to the fires. He allowed them to believe that a slight edge had crept into his voice however. It doomed his friendly manner and made them hate the thing underneath because they could see it more clearly.

"I'm afraid everything else is out at the moment. Later on you can move on, to better vistas, from the ninth floor to the tenth perhaps. Now it's the District or the Groups. Make up your minds."

His finger tips touched lightly and the plump hands cupped beneath them. He looked like a rather pompous parson.

Lewis had the absurd idea that Capulet was playing some childish game with his fingers, as he began to interlace them, methodically, one by one. It was rather like the trick his father used to play with him, when he was knee high and easily amused, the one about the Church and the Steeple. He watched the Manager hopefully in case he opened the doors and showed them the people. Suddenly,

for the second time, he felt a coldness in him as he realised that his mind was wandering away to strange fancies.

Capulet hadn't noticed the preoccupation on Lewis's face. Instead, he was waiting for an answer, and his attention was on Jane. He expected some comment. Eventually he got it. The girl wasn't absorbed with trivialities and her claws were out. Her pause had only been the time taken for anger to boil.

"You mean we have no choice."

He attempted to meet her smouldering glare but failed. With a look of reproach, a cross between a reprimand and hurt feelings, he removed his attention to the high, vaulted ceiling.

If he had expected to see her chastened, when he dropped his eyes again, he was wrong. His carefully practised look of reproach had often silenced a dissenter forever, or at least until the end of the interview. He had counted on some reaction but it was evident that she was unrepentant.

"You're a damned fraud!"

His cheeks reddened. At the same time he was glad that the drug was working to some extent. He instinctively turned his attack on Lewis. "Tell me. You are a Technician Grade Four aren't you?"

"That's me . . . Grade Four." Lewis hooked his long arm round the back of his chair and looked as ungainly as he could. He knew Capulet preferred the knees together, sit up and look smart posture, normally adopted by his supplicants. It would hurt the butter-fat little man to see deliberate disrespect.

Capulet's hand trembled slightly. A muscle somewhere in the round, abundantly corpulent arm had taken to itself an involuntary tic. He brushed away imaginary fluff from the swelling front of his coat and his movement was jerky and cross. "Attitudes, Mr. McGraw. I hate attitudes. You and your wife are doing this to annoy me, like a pair of intractable kids trying on rudeness for the first time with a kind parent. You want to make things difficult. After all, I'm only attempting to find you a place to live."

For once, as if with a sudden sympathy, Jane was almost reasonable. "Don't you understand, Mister Capulet. Lewis and I don't want what you have to offer. Not at all. We

hate your two by fours, one down and three up, even with television in all the rooms and automatic everything. Please keep it, Mr. Capulet."

He puffed his cheeks at her indignantly. "It's a kind of snobbery. You have no room for snobbery. Remember you are Contracted Labour. Contracted Labour fits into its place. It does as it's told and is grateful." His face was longer, and harder in outline, as if someone had put stiffeners into the roly-poly plumpness.

"Slots and round holes!"

Jane managed to make it sound like an oath, an outlandish curse. There was a fierce, impulsive ring about the words.

Capulet pushed back into his chair, into the well padded plastic. It seemed as if he had found an obnoxious smell under his nose, a snake with its fangs flickering. Strangely the gleam had returned to his eyes and conflicted with the shock he pretended. "That wasn't called for, Mrs. McGraw. The Company does all it can for its Staff." He leaned forward again. There were some more tricks up his sleeve. "After all where would we be without fringe benefits? How would you care to find accommodation for yourself? Really now. Think about it."

Lewis was as slow in speech as ever. Each word was carefully considered, so careful in fact that they seemed devoid of sarcasm. "We couldn't find a place for ourselves. The Organisation owns it all." It was as if he had missed the implied threat in the Manager's remarks.

"Then what the hell are we arguing about? You know we have the whip hand. You also know I won't be persuaded to give you better accommodation." His stare became a gimlet, an hypnotic thrust, diamond hard. "Before you go from this room you will sign and you will be happy to sign for anything we choose to give you."

"Once upon a time they called this the Company Store racket, not fringe benefits," Jane flounced back at the man and his stare. She thrust hard at his overblown hypocrisy. "We earn the money, don't we? If we are going to be taken, then leave us the right to be fleeced with our eyes open."

Capulet noted the high flush in the girl's face and the

slight slur in her speech. The infallible formula, in the drug they used for this purpose, was taking its gradual effect. Soon it would be time to change roles. A little more probing and they would be ripe.

With seeming petulance he pouted his cherubic lips, like an old, spoilt woman. There was an eternal sulkiness about his expression and somehow it had a feline menace in its undertones. "A Contract is a Contract the whole world over. Within its protection you can live and be part of a moving whole, with purpose and direction. Outside it's cold and hungry. Outside is anarchy."

His hands were spread on the desk and they could see the smoothness of them, the opulent wealth of good living in their chubbiness. "Don't get the idea that your work is worth anything. The only reason we protect you is because you are consumers and we need consumers for the cycle of production and consumption we have made."

She was red eyed now. Her skin was dry and her flushed face was feverish. "Planned into nothing. No joy and no song, Mr. Capulet. That's what you want for us. We would rather tear up our Contract and get out. Death on a bare rock is better than life in a dog kennel." She was like a hunter still, a hunter blooded and shaky but still fighting. She wouldn't finish until either they, or Capulet, were dropped in the tracks of their dispute.

She had glanced at her husband as she spoke and she saw his acknowledgement and the slow glimmer of his comforting smile. It was enough encouragement for her, enough to rout the whole, unsmiling Organisation. The small doubt in his face, the shadow of fear in his eyes, she missed altogether. Then she couldn't know how she looked to him as the drug worked on her.

The Manager was curiously restrained. He said nothing to either of them this time. Indeed, a look, which was certainly satisfaction, crossed his face briefly and he rubbed his hands like a tradesman with a bargain.

Lewis was watching him carefully. He appreciated that a strange element was stirring in his own body and to combat its warm, seducing fingers he had forced himself to be even more than usually meticulous. He marked down every move Capulet made, assessed it deliberately, and his

consciousness was like a slow film magnifying detail to mountains. At last he found his voice and he spoke softly with an unexpected lisp in his slow drawl. "Don't you know what we want?"

"Is it what you want or is it merely what this woman wants?" The man was insulting and his lips were twisting into a sadistic sneer. "Do you really want to tear up your Contract?"

"We both want it." Lewis was dignified, despite the parched throat that throttled his diction, and the heat burning his flesh. "In this we are one person. That's why we are tearing up our Contract."

"And, if you refuse our offer of a home, you think we will let you tear up the Contract? You want to force us into a blind alley, so that we haven't any alternative?"

"Something like that. You can't lose face can you?" Lewis was struggling now with a scene too large to contemplate and with a voice that seemed to have a life of its own.

"Never fear, you will sign the Agreement."

"If we do it will be coercion and that will make the Agreement and the Contract void. One is tied to the other." McGraw tried to smile at his wife but his smile was a travesty. Perhaps the hugeness of her lips, as she smiled back at him, made him feel very small, an insignificant particle, but his speech was hardly more than a whisper as he tried to continue. "Makes a mockery of Law if we are coerced. An illegal Contract is void from inception."

Jane's startled and excited chatter broke into the painful silence which followed. She sought to stop the confrontation between her husband and Capulet, out of a sudden apprehension that the Manager had the advantage, if they started a legalistic splitting of fine hairs. "We will have our way whatever the book of rules says. We will defy you. You can't force us to take the accommodation and you can't afford to be beaten. It's an impasse and our Contract is finished. Hear me? It's finished."

The Manager heard the two voices, each in its way different, but yet the same voice, the voice of unity. "Neither of you are insane. We always check that. I can see that neither of you are minors either." His eyes wandered to

Jane's figure and then snapped back to her husband's face, genuinely guilty. "Nor are you drunk. If you sign the Agreement no court on Earth could find it illegal."

They were both silent, absorbed with their internal fight, and hearing him as a distant nagging sound, like the cynical rasp of a cruel sea on the rocks.

"Look at it calmly. You must see that this Agreement will offer you a valuable benefit, for what amounts to a token deduction from your salary. What can anybody find wrong with that?" He swung his chair from side to side and permitted himself a smile of indulgent pleasure.

Lewis's head seemed to clear for a long second. He took his advantage and replied quickly. "Morally wrong. It's at least morally wrong." His mind prodded for a half recalled fact. There had been others against signing of course. Rumours crept their way about the Factory and the Offices. Most of those who had refused, before they saw Capulet, had signed afterwards. Others had been promoted, without apparent reason, and were given the best accommodation, in the select Management Sector. Had anyone sustained their refusal? If they had where were they now?

"Nothing is morally wrong if it is upheld in Court," Capulet mocked him gently.

Jane tried to come to her man's defence. "Just saying that is immoral. Capulet, I spit on you." Her words trailed away until they were almost inaudible.

If she had been able, she would have spat her defiance at him, as a virgin spied on by a sly eye might tear the eye from its socket.

He laughed openly at them. If he knew that Jane was equating him with some kind of worm, in her confused brain, he cared nothing for it.

Lewis made one more effort. He wanted to take Capulet's contempt and display it for what it was, an attempt to undermine them. "We can see the thorn beneath the flower, man. That's why we'd rather . . ."

Capulet wasn't smiling any more. He had seen the glassy sheen in their eyes and knew the time was right. Lewis had lost his voice halfway through his sentence and Jane was muttering. She was muttering the same words again and again. "We will not be used . . . we will not be used."

For no apparent reason the light began to fail in the room. Even the bright, wide window, through which the McGraws had been able to see one small corner of the great Factory, and its Offices, grew opaque. It was as if a mist had touched the glass. There was a blindness on them like an unexpected eventide.

The blindness brought fear to the McGraws. Their confusion seemed to clear, as it came, and they saw the thoughts in their minds as clear, liquid drops. The thoughts were of terror, of the things hidden in the crowded night.

The remaining light seemed to concentrate on Capulet's face. His face was hard and fleshy and it shone as if it was wet.

Jane saw her terror clearly. Whatever else they had expected, and talked over in the comforting haven of their bed, the onset of darkness had been a shock. She couldn't fight in the darkness because she couldn't see his face. Her mind groped for his consolation, and help, but the silence was everywhere, like a rock wall around her.

The light faded from Capulet's face. For a moment the blackness was absolute. Then two spots of light sprang from the ceiling above them. They fell on Lewis and Jane's faces and outlined them, draining them of all colour. Their seats had been carefully placed.

As if in a daze Lewis asked. "What sort of trick is this, Capulet?" He was no longer, it seemed, self contained. His tone lacked spirit and personality.

"My goodness, man, I'm only going to show you a film." Mock innocence belied the suspicion of threat in his voice. The hidden face chuckled. It was easy to imagine a mild, round kind of devil laughing at them, from the other side of the desk.

A screen lit up whitely, blank. It was set high on the wall to the left. The McGraws had to look at it from an angle and they couldn't exchange glances, without looking away from it. In any case the light shining down on them was blinding, against the shadow, and it was better to hold onto the screen.

They had lost the direct and precious communion between their closely attuned personalities. Without the com-

munion, expressed in quiet glances, they were exposed to the cruelty which lay around their private World.

"The film we are about to see is merely an advertisement of sorts. It's about the Residential Area Three." Capulet was friendly and avuncular again, as if he had forgotten, or forgiven, all the rudeness that had gone before.

His chuckle clucked at them and it was clearer than their own thoughts, like the sound of a chicken calling its chicks down a drainpipe. "I make no excuse for the blatant propaganda contained in it. It's meant to persuade you and after all it would be indecent to expect anything else but persuasion these days. Very well made, you'll find, in the best three dimensional colour. I suggest you relax and enjoy it."

Lewis began to piece his thoughts together, as a man with a bad migraine might do, while some kind of pain killer reduced the pain. 'Persuasion' meant little more to him than 'persuader', but then, he had hardly ever been clear on the practical difference between chastising the mind as against the body. Capulet had been chastising them. Something else had been chastising the inner parts of their spirit. What for? His mind tangled with the question as if it was a great web, sticky with implication, and his logic was so little that it was a mere insect.

There were no titles and no credits. Even the soft insinuating whisper of incidental music was absent. No brash, imperfect voice gave a commentary, extolling virtues plain enough to the eye anyway. It was no poster picture of the travelogue sort.

Instead a shot from a wide angle displayed a curve of very tall buildings, stretching round a park like a crescent moon. The buildings closed in upon themselves so that they were just a little less than a horseshoe, among a thousand other horseshoes; reaching to a distant, flat horizon.

The angle closed rapidly, and thrusting downwards, particularised the sheer walls into windows and shining plastic areas unmarked by weather or personality. Eventually the camera seemed to swoop downwards and then up, parting the leafy branches of an elderly oak. Up it came until it pressed like a wet, inquisitive nose against a window; ten floors high.

Like some stranger, peering, without conscience, into the

house and business of an innocent family, it took them into the room beyond, with a casual effrontery.

The room was by no means big but it was comfortable. It shone invitingly and its cleanliness was the special contribution of the plastic age. However, it had cunningly stripped away the fear of things too polished and man-made, by imitating the grained sheen of well-tended wood or the floral sweetness of wallpaper.

Furniture was placed round an eternal flame, at the centre of the room, which had the conceit of an open fire, and the texture of the furniture was solid and inviting. Here and there, too, a woman's deft hand had placed touches of colour and good taste where they would make the best impression.

It occurred to Lewis that these might have been Jane's very attempts at artistry, her very choice of material or painting. There, on the mantelpiece could be the very carving he had made as a child, a carving of a knight with his lance unhooked and pointing, and not out of a kit. It was as if they had been living there themselves already marking it with their own indelible character.

He attempted to mumble to himself and found that the words were frozen in his mouth and his throat was constricted. The words were clear enough in his brain though, even if no one else could hear them. "This is too right for us. Too clever by half. If we weren't playing for bigger stakes we might want to take it lock, stock and barrel." A small panic fluttered among the thoughts. Jane could be tempted.

She was tempted. Without his support, his visible support, and with her own anger and passion abused by the weakness which had appeared inside so strangely, she was lost. The urge to accept, without criticism, seemed to well up inside her. The room was like a glossy page from a magazine asking her to open it. Only the bare skeleton of a small rebellion, deep inside, stopped her from making the first overtures to surrender.

Capriciously, the camera took them from the room, into a kitchen, before they had time to assimilate every item in it. It was meant to tease them like a whiff of good cooking.

The kitchen was a place for good cooking. It was full of

all the working, handy things that make a kitchen perfect. Apart from that it was big, by any standards, and brought forth memories of the old, cool places of the past. They could feel the cool width of the place as if it was a room from an old Dutch painting touched with grace and husbandry.

Peace hung about its walls. It was the kind of peace that permitted the loud tick of a Grandfather clock, or the hum of insects from the gardens below, to lull the calm routine of a working day into a pleasure of contentment.

Jane knew that here she could make her beloved recipes. She could cull them from ancient cookery books, books mildewed with the steam of cooking and worn by turning, gentle fingers. Then she knew that kitchen would clear up after her, silently and efficiently.

The last thought brought her back to reality. What cleaned up the kitchen? It wasn't the sad, comforting face of a daily help who grumbled softly behind her as she left the kitchen but, nevertheless, was a jewel who loved the children. It was a host of hard and jangling gadgetry with the safety seal stamped on its rougher, hidden parts.

"My God," she thought. "My mind has been tottering."

The camera seemed to sense her sudden, urgent objection. Like the good host it was it drifted to another room with nearly indecent haste.

This room was a bedroom. Such a bedroom had never existed except in the dreams of a woman. There was the promise of sweet seduction in its every line, of privacy as secure as a cocoon buried deep in the warm earth.

Silver curtains swept down on either side of the wide picture windows and nearly touched the thick, pile carpet. The carpet, too, was silver and a pattern of light, golden lines were threaded into it. If a cloak, from the back of some forgotten nobleman, had been spread on the ground it would not have looked so sumptuous.

Then the bed. The bed was a wide couch. Its linen was purely white and folded like an immaculate handkerchief over the top of a beautiful coverlet. Jane could imagine its cool, smooth touch on her face as she lay there, looking through the window at the sky.

A dressing table, built in between two wardrobes, carried her make-up bottles, in a random pattern, on its glass top. Her favourite aides, carefully selected, and a new and intriguing scent at their centre which seemed a present to her alone.

Her eye saw, as in a dream, one door of her wardrobe open. There were clothes of wonderful outline within. Wonderingly, she spied her own favourite dress hanging there. She found tears hot on her cheeks and her small voice called for Lewis.

He heard her say the very words he had dreaded. He heard her asking, asking for his blessing on her decision. She was slipping into the pit dug for them. She was buying the picture they had to offer and she didn't care any more if it turned out less than it pretended, or was a prison, or a place of irritations which ended loves.

Lewis tried to rationalise the dress. In doing so, he found he could throw off the skins of mud which had coated his logic and his coherence. He knew this more than an attempt to make them buy. It was a test. If not a test of their own wills, for their own sake, but a test for Capulet's sake and Capulet's will.

Despair came and went from him like the painful sickness of a disease. He wanted to talk to her. He demanded to talk to her. If he could communicate it was easy.

The light from the ceiling blinded him and a vice encircled his neck. Yet, he turned his head.

Jane's eyes were focused on the dress. She knew it so well. Even the black, ornate clasp, where it joined the collar at the nape of the neck, was part of it. In all its infinite detail, the deep red that flattered her dark hair, and the long slim cut that fancied her long curves, it was her dress. The unrepeatable cloth, given to her by her Grandmother as a wedding present, and made up in the past few weeks with careful needle and thread, was all hers.

Lewis wanted to scream at her. His brain was like her fine needle probing for the stitching point, the response. He seemed to hear Capulet chuckle again and the sound was like a woman making a noise of subtle pleasure.

Lewis did scream once and clearly with anger.

Jane heard his following whisper. She felt pain, through her wonder at his crackling scream. His burning logic tore at her illusions, demanding attention. The dress seemed to exist in the wardrobe yet how could there be another? His voice asked her to dispossess it from the cupboard. It was not there and it could never be there. Think hard! Be calm and strip away the illusion. The dress is not there!

You are wearing the dress now!

Lewis was jubilant. The breakthrough, though it was only a cramped whisper, had done its work. She knew the truth. It hurt her and she would feel, perhaps, that he had robbed her, but he had won. They had won.

He felt himself leering at the shadow that was Capulet. He smiled his victory and hoped it wrecked the man's composure, show him who was the better fighter. Capulet had tested them for what purpose? Who cared a damn! They had beaten him and the system forever.

Surprisingly, Capulet didn't give up. The camera slunk away instead. It was like a cat who had stolen the family fish and was looking for a place to hide from retribution.

With a fresh and cocky dexterity it changed its tune and scampered with them into another room. This was a small and cosy room. There were toys on the floor, left haphazardly from play, and toys printed on the wallpaper laughing down at a cot in the corner.

The cot. What was in the cot? Was it another toy? Lewis stared down into it with a horror, a tearing contradiction inside him.

He sought out the shadow of Capulet. There was more than a dryness in his throat this time. There was also the salty pinch of tears on his lips. His hands worked to touch the fat neck across the desk but he had no power in them.

All he could mutter, softly, was: "Not again, please."

The child in the cot had eyes as blue as his own. The hair curling, traditionally soft, was her hair but with just a touch of gold in it, which high-lighted the blackness of it. It was their child. It could be nothing less than their child. How could he destroy that illusion without destroying her?

Small arms were reaching for her. It was significant that they weren't reaching for him. Like an arrow the appeal was shot in at the weakest point.

When he had pulled away the veil of illusion from the dress, she had accepted it. For a moment she had reacted, as a woman might, when her husband accidentally destroyed a possession. Then she knew her love was stronger than the disappointment for a lost rag, and so came to the truth. This time though it was more, much more. If he convinced her that the child was a delusion and a snare, the moment of doubt, her doubt, might be too long. Her fragile love, her impetuous hold on life might snap. Then he would be alone.

Was that what Capulet wanted?

Lewis screwed his head full faced to his wife. It had been his intention to snatch at her attention. He had the one, last line of shattering logic ready to whisper at her. Then he saw that she was beaming at the child with a radiance that defeated him. His worst fear was realised. How could he say the words.

"Our child cannot exist yet."

The struggle to realise it would break her. She would see the child then she would remember that they were just married. Love would fight the ideal of chastity, and the yearning, to be the mother of this child, would fight his logic. In time she would know the truth and she would hate him and life.

If she was going to hate anyone it would be Capulet!

Damn the creature! He devised the plot. Let him pay for the victim.

Lewis found his lurking face. It didn't appear to be his face. There was a woman's face there, in the darkness, with the thin look of death about her. He screwed up his eyes until he was sure of it. Capulet was part and parcel of the female face, gloating over the undoing of another female. She chuckled at him for the third time and this time it was the impressment on the wax. Her long, straggly hair and her black, black dress didn't deceive him any longer. He knew what they were doing to him and Jane and why.

The Organisation were supposed to be charitable in the human sense but their charity was icy. All was subordinated to the grand scheme. They had wanted to know the reason for their rebellion and they wanted desperately to fit them

into place. If that had meant the death of one love affair it would have suited them. The better the purpose the harsher the means.

The child was standing now, smiling at them with good humour. Its small three years old face was delightful. Jane was actually standing and groping towards it.

She felt she had neglected the baby too long. She should have left the other rooms until last, and come straight here in the first place, whoever the visitors. What kind of Mother was she turning into? Oddly she had sensed that Lewis wasn't so pleased with the child today and she wondered if it was a small matter of feeling neglected.

Lewis, though, wasn't the sort to be vindictive or capable of doing a really uncharitable act. He was too darned good, too kind and self controlled for that.

She thought the child looked so nice in the cot and she was glad they had decided to take the flat all those years ago. Not that she liked the way the Company had foisted it on them . . .

He watched her hands touch the cold screen and knew what Capulet would do. His hands arced in tight, metal bands and he wanted to stop the cruel act before it happened but he was helpless. Reality had to come at sometime.

The screen flicked off . . . just like that.

Lewis heard her scream and saw her fall across the corner of the desk as the lights came up again. He let her lie there, on the floor, and stared across the desk at Capulet with the fullness of murder in his eyes.

The fat man wasn't smiling any more. His face had a haunting tragedy about its rolling fatness. Two disenchanted hands played with a glass paper weight with the Company's emblem set in gold at its centre. He seemed to find little consolation in it.

Lewis found his voice, and it was his normal voice, but not so slow or casual any more. He spat his attack at the defeated Manager.

"Why did you do it?"

"More than a matter of the accommodation."

Lewis marked his stutter and the crestfallen air about him. "You do it to everyone who has spirit, don't you?"

Make up a film from their long-studied tastes and even their deeper wants. Then you weaken their resistance . . . what with now? It has to be a drug, doesn't it?" He managed to get his hands, still clenched with hate, to the edge of the desk. "Tell me why, you white worm, before I find the strength to kill you."

"It's Management Selection. If she had seen through our charade both of you would have been promoted at once, to the beginnings of the top at any rate. She fell for it but you didn't. That would have been all right if you had been ruthless enough to disillusion her about the baby. You would have been the right kind for leadership. Not counting the cost as long as it was right."

"You had hopes after the dress incident, didn't you?"

He nodded and straightened up his shoulders. "You have put us into a difficult position."

Lewis grinned but his grin was like the scowl of a hungry wolf. "Good, I like that."

The cheeks puffed once and very half heartedly. "The Organisation does its best for the majority. I can't promote you and there's even worse to come."

"What's that?"

"I can't even give you the accommodation."

Lewis saw the implication and there was a cold stone in his heart. In the flat he could have made Jane's dream come true. Perhaps he could have saved her by duplicating the dream of the place and the child. In four years or so she could have taken up the threads with reality again.

"We know too much, is that it?"

Capulet shrugged. "You know too much. She doesn't know anything that matters. If it was just her then we could have done something." His eyes brightened momentarily. "If you left her perhaps we could make a separate deal. She could have her flat, and attention from the medicos perhaps, while you joined us in the Management."

Lewis shook his head.

The Manager sighed. "The evidence was against me. I should never have asked." He looked back over his shoulder at the Factory. "We will put you on a plane to a place where there are no Contracts. If it's any consolation there

is no starvation out there. It was something of a fable to keep our workers happy."

"You mean you have to have unemployed consumers too." Lewis was standing now and moving towards Jane. "No one in the world could be left out. There's too much to go round."

Capulet stood up too, warily and wearily. "The only catch for them is that they aren't allowed to work. That's the real starvation. Outside it's a bit hotchpotch, and indolence makes for a bit of unrest, but nothing worse in terms of survival."

"Give us our Contracts and we'll go then." The tall man bent down, and picked up his wife, as a child might pick up a discarded doll and cradle it in its arms. "I shall have plenty to do bringing her back to life." He stared at Capulet and there was a touch of cruelty in his eyes. It was better than killing the man or punching his round chin. "You didn't try that with your woman, did you?"

Capulet seemed to sink back into himself and he was suddenly frightened of the man with the girl in his arms. He muttered some sort of excuse, trying to vindicate himself. "The Organisation needed me. I had to let her take second place. She has been very good. We understand each other."

Lewis saw the dark, thin woman's face, in his mind's eye, and her mean involvement with the deception practised on his Jane. Capulet hadn't known that the fantasy of the drug had brought the crying, defeated character of his wife through into the interview.

With a little pity Lewis said, "I feel very sorry for you, Capulet."

The Manager seemed torn between tears and anger. Then his inner strength took over, the force that had carried him through similar troubles. He was hard and ruthless again, glorying in his power over men.

"Wait in the Reception until the transport comes."

Lewis heard his imperious tone and saw the full little belly try to outdo the thrusting chest in honour. It was like the fleeting vision, seen in a fairground, where the twisted glass played amusing, or frightening, tricks with face and

figure. It might be a transitory picture, with a moral tag, the tag to label the loyal Executive who put business before his personal affairs.

He pushed the door open with his back and left, his eyes still on his leader, like a freed slave backing away from an expected doom.

He left gratefully, with his wife still held in his arms.

— R. W. MACKELWORTH

THE DOOR

by Alistair Bevan

Naylor rested for a moment, one hand on the scaled surface of the Door, and listened to the confused noise from the Levels beneath him. He smiled slightly. He had planned it all very carefully, and it had worked like a dream.

He was an odd-looking man. He was tall, and intensely thin. His dark blue uniform emphasised his gauntness. His hair was straight and over-long; it hung across his face, almost permanently obscuring one eye. The hair was iron-grey, streaked with white, for Naylor had grown prematurely old in the pursuit of his dream.

A louder booming sound came up from the depths, and the blue throat of the tunnel seemed momentarily to vibrate. Naylor looked anxious and turned back to resume his hammering at the edge of the Door. It would be stupid now, with success only the thickness of a steel sheet away, to lose out as a result of any relaxation of effort.

It was evident that the Door had not been opened for centuries. The thin crack round its edge was filled with rust, and there were signs that some blackish compound had originally been used to assist the seal. Naylor smiled again, cynically. Trust the Whites, when denying man his birthright, to make a good job of the details. He swung the hammer violently, sending bituminous chips flying across the confined space.

The Door was set at an angle in the tunnel, and Naylor was working above his head. Ten minutes of hammering and he had to put down the tools again. He sat back awkwardly on the sloping deck and wiped his face.

It was a queer situation. Naylor felt detached from reality. It was as if the world had ceased to exist an hour back when he had set off that first charge. Naylor supposed that it had. An hour ago the Levels had been vibrantly alive; now most of the complex was a ruined shambles. The thought hurt him badly.

Naylor was, or had been, a Ventman, and a good one. No less than the chief overseer for Orange City. With a strong chance of promotion and the possibility of finishing down as chief engineer for the Whites. Well, all that was gone for good now. It had been sacrificed for something better.

Naylor reached back and touched the cold metal of the Door, trying to convince himself of its reality. He wondered if it was the only exit from the Levels to the outer world. It hardly seemed likely. Perhaps at this very moment someone close by was hammering at an identical seal. To him might go the honour and satisfaction of making the first breach. That would be unfortunate, but it could not be helped. Naylor sat still. He had to give his throbbing muscles a little more time to recover. The frenzy of his first assault on the little lock, added to the exertion of the last hour and the nervous strain of months, had almost exhausted him. He took a cigarette from the pocket of his tunic and lit it. The forbidden habit of smoking had been growing on him for years, but he had never needed the drug more than at this moment.

He listened to the echoes of the tumult beneath his feet. He could imagine a part at least of what was happening down there. Bands of refugees, forced from the city-tiers they knew best, would be wandering in the half-darkened complexes of tunnels. Masked and armed White guards, handicapped by the destruction of their central command, must be rushing in panic from point to point. His own men, temporarily secure behind the barricades of blown-in tunnels, were still following the master plan, wrecking lines of communication and ventilation, furthering the already terrible chaos. Whilst he sat and looked at the Door.

Like any Ventman, Naylor carried the plan of the Levels in his head. He could visualise the whole structure, like a great wedding cake buried in the ground. 'Ground' of course was a concept Naylor shared with very few. To the rest of them, even the White leaders on whom they all depended, the phrase would have no meaning. To them, the world outside the Levels was the equivalent of Limbo. What poor insects they all were, in truth!

Naylor turned back, the cigarette still tucked between

his thin lips, and resumed his attack on the Door. As he worked he turned over in his mind the chain of reasoning that had led to this present act of liberation.

For Naylor it had all started years ago. Too many years to think about. He had found a cache of books in a disused plenum trunking. As a Ventman of course Naylor was used to frequenting the less-used portions of the great machine in which they all lived. Such finds were not uncommon, and the law relating to them was strict. For some reason Naylor had broken the law, laying himself open not only to professional ruin but to imprisonment or even death. He had not radioed for an archaeologist; instead he had concealed the find, and smuggled the books away at a later time. Then he had begun to read his first history.

For a time the ideas he encountered baffled him. What, for instance, was a planet? Or a sun, or the solar system? And what in the name of White and Yellow was an ICBM? All men knew that Creation was restricted to seven Levels and the generators of the North, South, East and West. There was nothing else.

Naylor had eventually arrived at a logical reconstruction of events. It made a frightening picture. He saw a civilisation so advanced it could with facility bridge the depths of space, yet so morally hog-tied by its own worse nature that it could contemplate not only global warfare but conflict on an interplanetary scale. The thought made Naylor shudder even now. He paused in his work on the Door as for the thousandth time he imagined the cities of Earth cowering under the attack of her colony planets. Civilisation crumbling, whole continents made sterile. Lands baleful with radioactivity. At that time the bunkers had been built. They surpassed all other engineering achievements. They were huge in size, self-contained and powered for all time by slow reactors buried near them in the ground. Into them the populations of whole cities had migrated, and civilisation had pulled down the lid on itself. Obviously in at least some of the bunkers the racial memory of the real world had died, or been suppressed. The Levels was such a place . . .

Slowly Naylor had evolved a grandiose scheme. Like a

second Moses he would lead forth the Chosen to reinhabit the upper land that once had belonged to them. It would be a fantastic experiment. Who knew, for instance, whether other of the buried cities had not already reclaimed the land? Naylor might open the Door to find himself a half-savage troglodyte, something to be shot out of hand. Or perhaps continents and seas had shifted. He might break the seal only to drown them all. Or maybe—and this was the worst thought of all—maybe there was no outer world, and the ancient writing was merely a snare and a delusion. Perhaps Limbo really waited behind the little trap at which he was working so desperately. Naylor checked his imagination. It was impossible to retreat now. Either the Door opened or he himself was a dead man. In any case he had spent years enough turning over the logic of the thing. There was no room left for doubt. Naylor knew himself to be right, and that was all that mattered.

Mustering support for his plan had been slow, dangerous work. Naylor had been helped in it by his intimate knowledge of the Levels, and the folk who lived under each Colour. Since he started out as a twenty-year-old apprentice for the Greens he had worked his way down through most of the stack. Green Level lay nearest to the surface, the suburb of the vertical metropolis. It was a quiet place, a favourite holiday spot for the Whites. They took their families up there to drowse among the acres of the hydroponic farms. Immediately below this rustic area was Blue City, the slum; brawling and unwholesome, usually restless, invariably in trouble with its birthrate balance. A rotten disc in the Voltaic pile of civilisation, Blue City had always needed a firm hand in government. It was from the Blues that Naylor had made most of his converts. They followed faithfully, even if they did not understand.

Below Blue City the Levels increased in complexity and culture. There was the intermediate Brown Level, then the Red, then Orange and Yellow and finally, deepest sunk of all, White. White City was the financial and religious capital of the vertical empire, the seat of government and order. Naylor knew that under the old order he would never have been allowed to sink to full White status. Instead he had founded his own heretic creed; to rise. With

him, seeking the heights was no longer a phrase of contempt.

Naylor, with the co-operation of the Green, Blue, Brown and Red Ventchiefs assured and with a tight-lipped band of Blues armed and ready to fight to the death, had worked out a disastrously simple plan. Nitrous oxide, judiciously introduced at certain points into the great vascular system of the ventilation, had quietened without violence whole sections of the population. Into the trunkings supplying the military and parliamentary centres of White City Naylor had fed the fumes of cyanide, stilling these ganglia for ever. Then his strong-arm boys had gone into action on a score of fronts, smashing lines of communication, blowing in trunk tunnels. Despite their decimation the Whites had fought back spiritedly. This had been anticipated; a planned upward retreat had begun, while Naylor and a handful of men raced ahead into the forbidden complexes above Green City to search for the openings to the outer world that Naylor knew must be there . . .

The joint was clear all the way round now. Naylor put his shoulder to the barrier and heaved. There was no result. He leaned back panting and glared at the Door. Engineering principles dictated that it should open outwards. It was probably set into a tapered frame the better to resist shock waves from surface explosions. There was no way of guessing its thickness; moving it might well be beyond human strength. Naylor looked back uncertainly at the explosives he had brought up with him. He intended to use them only as a last resort; he had already seen enough of the effects of blast in tunnels to make him cautious. He was still sitting undecided when there was a shout behind him and a clatter of feet. Gil Lombard, Vent Overseer for the Reds, came racing up the slope. He carried an automatic rifle, he looked distraught and his face was smudged with blood. The Whites had enfiladed the barriers, pouring fire on the defenders through dozens of side approaches. The fighting was now less than two hundred yards away. Underlining his words came the splitting racket of guns as Naylor's emergency rearguard went into action.

Naylor swore and knocked Lombard out of the way. He had the pack open and was lifting out the greyish bundles

of explosives when the other man saw the Door. He said, "White and Yellow, Naylor, you've found it!"

Naylor's hands were starting to shake. He said, "Help me set these, for reaction's sake."

"No, Naylor, it won't work. You'll cave the tunnel."

There was a roar behind them, and a chorus of shrieks. The noises rang devilishly in the confined space. Naylor looked back. Away down the tunnel a searchlight blazed on. Something sang past his head and struck the Door with a clang. Naylor dropped flat, grabbed for his own gun and fired a burst into the brightness. The light went out. He leapt to his feet and began again thrusting with his shoulder at the Door.

Beside him Lombard screeched, flapped like a fish and collapsed. There was a red patch on the Door in front of him through which his hands slid theatrically. The smoke drifting up from below was making accurate shooting impossible, but in the narrow tunnel the ricocheting rounds were deadly enough. Naylor swore again and tried to get the body to one side. It was too heavy for him. He left it huddled where it had fallen, and pushed the charges between it and the barrier to his hopes. He fed out cable desperately, feeling the air round him alive with missiles. He used his own gun again, momentarily silencing the attackers. Then he ducked his head, hunched his shoulders and rammed the contacts home . . .

When the explosion was over he was still alive. He sat up and saw a glare of light at the end of the metal tube, where the Door had been. He felt although he could not hear the hot wind rushing out from the Levels. He staggered forward, partly impelled by the gale of decompression. The sill of the Door was ragged; he tripped over it and rolled out into sunlight and a heat fiercer than any he had experienced. Before he landed he realised the flaw in his reasoning. It had been such a simple error; so blindingly obvious he had been unable to see it. He should have read less history and played more chess. He rose and grinned round at the brilliant desert in which he stood; then he took his first and last breath of the deadly air of Mars.

THE CRIMINAL

by Johnny Byrne

The stubby silver object was seen to glint dully for a few moments before it came hissing out of the hard November sky. It settled easily on the pavement outside a large departmental store. A crowd quickly gathered around it, watchful and intent. Nothing happened for a while. It just continued to vibrate silently.

Then a section seemed to melt and a seat shaped like a cupped palm and attached to a long, madly-jointed metal arm shot out and forcefully ejected a man onto the pavement. The arm retracted and the hull became whole again. From somewhere inside the ship a tinny amplified voice pronounced something briefly which the crowd couldn't understand. Then the ship shot up and away through the Autumn air.

The crowd closed in on the man. He stood up and looked at them curiously. He was tall, beautifully proportioned and didn't look old. He was quite naked.

"Who are you?" someone asked him.

The man looked over the heads of those nearest him. "Who said that?" he asked.

Nobody answered and he spoke to the crowd at large. His voice was melodious, clear and strong. "I'm being punished. I've committed a crime and they're punishing me."

The crowd looked on, silent and wondering.

"Where are you from, mate?" shouted someone from the back.

The Man gestured, pointing to the sky. "Up there where I come from they punish you if you commit a crime. Anybody who commits a crime is always sent away somewhere for punishment . . . That's the way it's always been," he added softly.

The crowd Oooohed at this and a small man near the front stepped forward and demanded truculently: "If you

lot are always sent away for punishment, how come we've never seen any of you before?"

"Yes," an old lady with an armful of shopping chipped in, "we'd know about your kind if they'd been here before . . . Just look at the state of him!" she muttered to someone beside her.

"You are wrong, old lady," the Man said. "I am not the first to be sent to this particular place. There was another, I believe, though it was a long time ago."

"Was he famous?" asked one of the crowd.

"Can't say," answered the Man.

The crowd stirred restlessly.

"Was it Caesar?" a voice said.

"Huskisson," said another, "definitely, yes."

The crowd began to shower names on him.

"Hitler!" . . . "Churchill?" . . . "Kaspar Hauser?"

"Crippen!" yelled the old lady with the shopping. "We'll all be murdered in our beds!"

The Man held up his hand for silence. He looked meditatively at the swelling, excited crowd. "My," he said softly, "my . . . What a lot of you there are."

"The name!" the crowd yelled in one voice. "The name of the other one they sent here?"

Then they were silent. The Man thought for a moment, his eyes on the pavement. The crowd waited. He lifted his head. "Ah yes!" he said. "Adam. His name was Adam."

— JOHNNY BYRNE

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